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Hungary and the Munich Crisis: The Revisionist Dilemma

In the first days of 1938, Kálmán Kánya, Hungary's foreign minister, privately expressed the opinion that there was nowhere in Europe a "will to war" and that, barring accidents, peace seemed assured for at least a year.¹ In a technical sense Kánya's prediction was borne out by events, but he clearly did not foresee the Central European upheavals that were only months away. In the crisis over the Austrian Anschluss, Hungary was to remain a powerless bystander, unable, and to a certain extent unwilling, to raise a voice of protest. The Czechoslovak crisis was an entirely different matter. Virtually all politically conscious Hungarians believed that Prague's time of troubles should be exploited to obtain territorial revision and strengthen Hungary's position in East Central Europe. But, as previous historians of this subject have indicated,² Hungary's course in the unfolding Czechoslovak crisis was hesitant and indecisive. The desire to share in the dismemberment of her northern neighbor was tempered by a number of factors, among them a fear of subsequent German expansion into Hungary, the extremely retarded state of Hungary's rearmament, and the hope of peaceful change accomplished with the support of Great Britain.

Internal political developments also played a crucial role in forming Hungary's attitude in the events leading up to the Munich conference. Although from 1920 on there had prevailed in Hungarian political life an almost complete unanimity concerning national goals, namely the need for territorial revision of the despised peace settlement, after 1936 there had developed a divergence of opinion about methods to achieve this goal. Hitler's successful remilitarization of the Rhineland and the appearance on the European scene of a rearmed and militant Germany tended to widen the rift in Hungary between the cautious conservatives of the Government Party and representatives of the bellicose Right Radical or fascist movement. The latter,

1. Report of Sir Geoffrey Knox, British minister in Budapest, Jan. 13, 1938, Public Record Office, FO381, C636/23/22 (hereafter cited as PRO, followed by item number).

2. See in particular the incomparable work of C. A. Macartney, *October Fifteenth: A History of Modern Hungary, 1929-1945*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1961), 1:202-75. Other useful accounts are Nándor A. F. Dreisziger, *Hungary's Way to World War II* (Astor Park, Fla., and Toronto, 1968), and László Zsigmond, "Ungarn und das Münchener Abkommen," *Acta Historica*, 6, no. 3-4 (1959): 251-86. Less reliable is Jörg K. Hoensch, *Der ungarische Revisionismus und die Zerschlagung der Tschechoslowakei* (Tübingen, 1967), pp. 48-106.

ensconced primarily in the army officer corps, recommended not only complete military and political cooperation with Hitler's Germany but also the introduction into Hungary of a fascist political system based on the military. Hungary's conservatives viewed such a linking of foreign policy and domestic politics with alarm, and their ambivalent attitude about full cooperation with Germany was one of the reasons for the cautious policy the Hungarian government pursued in the unfolding Czechoslovak crisis. A proper understanding of the dilemma confronting Hungary in her quest for treaty revision can thus be achieved only if her diplomatic policies are examined both in the European context and against a background of domestic political tension.

The crisis that was to bring Europe to the edge of war in September 1938 began for Hungary almost a year earlier in November 1937, when a delegation of Hungarian leaders, headed by Prime Minister Kálmán Darányi and Foreign Minister Kánya, journeyed to Berlin. They were given a candid view of Hitler's plans for extensive territorial changes in Danubian Europe. Hungary, in a sense, posed a special problem for Hitler, because she bordered on both of his future victims and, if hostile, could cause some embarrassment. The strategy he conceived in 1937 seems clear in retrospect: he would assure Budapest's neutrality in the Anschluss question by allaying fears about German interference in Hungarian domestic affairs and, more concretely, by offering the opportunity for territorial aggrandizement in Czechoslovakia.

During the November visit the Führer and his colleagues deftly set the foundation for this strategy. On a number of occasions after 1933 German spokesmen had acknowledged the need for cooperation in a revisionist campaign against Czechoslovakia, but the Hungarians had never received from Hitler an explicit recognition of their claim to integral revision in the North—that is, to the whole of the Felvidék (Slovakia and Ruthenia). This the German leader was now prepared to do. In a private talk with his visitors, Hitler on his own initiative gave assurances that Germany did not aspire to any part of Slovakia in the event that Czechoslovakia was dismembered. Emphatically denying that he laid claim to Bratislava (Pressburg, Pozsony), he asserted that he wanted a "strong Hungary" and a common German-Hungarian border on the Carpathians, especially since this would free some of his army divisions for duty elsewhere.³

3. Information on Hitler's frank statements emerges from scattered later references, including *Allianz Hitler-Horthy-Mussolini: Dokumente zur ungarischen Aussenpolitik (1933-1944)*, ed. Lajos Kerekes et al. (Budapest, 1966), no. 28 (hereafter cited as *Allianz*); *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945* (Washington, D.C., 1949-66), series D, vol. 2, no. 114 (hereafter cited as *DGFP*); and László Zsigmond, ed., *Diplomáciai iratok Magyarország külpolitikájához, 1936-1945*, vol. 1: Lajos Kerekes, ed., *A Berlin-Róma tengely kialakulása és Ausztria annexiója, 1936-1938* (Budapest, 1962), no. 394 (hereafter cited as *DIMK*).

Hitler's statement on his territorial aspirations and his pledges of non-interference in Hungarian internal affairs tended to act as a powerful catalyst in the resolution of a political debate that had been simmering below the surface in Hungary over the previous year. The Right Radical army officers, sharing with other European fascist groups a propensity for dynamic programs and swift military solutions, were coming to believe that Hungary's best chance, indeed only chance, for territorial revision lay in an intimate linking of fortunes with National Socialist Germany. They were convinced that by 1940 Germany and Italy would have a two-year advantage in armaments over the West, and would doubtless seize the favorable opportunity to impose their will on Europe. Hungary, by virtue of her location and national goals, would have to participate in the resulting conflict. Yet Hungary was woefully unprepared for the task, and the spokesman for the restless officers, Chief of Staff Jenő Rátz, therefore proposed in a series of memoranda during 1937 a program of massive rearmament and a radical remaking of the inner life of the nation, including enactment of anti-Jewish legislation and a "healthy land reform."⁴

The initial reaction of the conservatives to these proposals had been negative. The representatives of the traditional ruling classes were inclined to pursue a more cautious, long-term program by which Hungary might realize her territorial claims without drastic domestic upheaval or dangerous military adventures. Political figures of this persuasion, notably Count István Bethlen, Kálmán Kánya, Count Pál Teleki, and, to a certain extent, Regent Miklós Horthy, wished to be certain that in the process of obtaining her national goals Hungary did not deviate from the prevailing system that sustained their power and preserved at least a façade of parliamentary forms and constitutional liberties. In the eyes of these conservatives, intimate cooperation with Hitler and servile imitation of Nazi Germany would not only compromise national sovereignty but introduce into Hungary a vulgarity and violence that was alien to the nation's traditions.

The conservatives were not at all averse to the notion of receiving German assistance in the revisionist campaign, so long as there were no unacceptable accompanying risks. They agreed with the General Staff officers that for the foreseeable future Germany would be the dominant voice in Central Europe. But Hitler's unorthodox and bellicose methods seemed likely to unleash a European war in which, so Horthy and others believed, English naval power would bring an eventual triumph over Germany. If Hungary

4. For Rátz's initiative see Péter Sipos, "Az Imrédy kormány megalakulásának történetéről," *Szászadok*, C, no. 1 (1966): 69–70. Further details on Right Radical activity in 1937 can be found in Nicholas M. Nagy-Talavera, *The Green Shirts and the Others: A History of Fascism in Hungary and Rumania* (Stanford, 1970), pp. 123–31.

were formally to ally with Germany, her fate would probably be worse than that of the hated peace settlement after World War I.

Until the fall of 1937 the Right Radicals were unable to influence domestic or foreign policy along the lines suggested by General Rátz. But the Berlin visit transformed the situation. Never before had the possibility of territorial revision been dangled before the Hungarians in such a concrete form. As a result, for the first time some of the wary conservatives in the government, including Prime Minister Darányi, began to see the need for substantial military modernization in preparation for a future European conflict. In the aftermath of the Berlin visit, Darányi and General Rátz, with the approval of the regent, worked behind the scenes to produce an acceptable program based on Rátz's proposals. When the orthodox economists of the Finance Ministry branded the planned expenditure as highly unrealistic, Béla Imrédy, president of the Hungarian National Bank, was drawn into the discussions. Imrédy, a brilliant economist with close ties in Western Europe, regarded a somewhat reduced version of Rátz's rearmament plan as both feasible and desirable. As one of a number of political conservatives who for the previous year had been searching for ways to "take the wind out of the sails" of the Right Radical movement, Imrédy was also willing to support some of the chief of staff's political demands. Thus the program which Darányi cautiously announced at the city of Győr in early March 1938 included not only greatly increased expenditures for "national defense" but also legislation aimed at curtailing Jewish influence in the nation's economic life.⁵

The attempt of the militant officers to influence foreign policy, however, continued to be thwarted. The conduct of foreign relations was the exclusive responsibility of Kánya, who, according to C. A. Macartney, was the "only Hungarian Foreign Minister of the inter-war period to be the real controller of his country's foreign policy."⁶ Kánya had served his diplomatic apprenticeship in Habsburg days and was equipped to view the European scene with a worldliness, detached realism, and cynicism few of his contemporaries possessed. Though an ardent revisionist, he felt that Hungary, surrounded by hostile neighbors and weak to the point of impotence, would do best to avoid a policy that was too ambitious or disruptive. He instinctively distrusted the army officers and feared the internal and external consequences should their ambitious programs be enacted. Caution, patience, ambiguity—these were the key elements of the "free-hand" policy that Kánya had enunciated already in 1933 and that was reflected after 1936 in the reluctance to place Hungary irrevocably in either of two camps, the Axis or the West, that seemed headed for a future conflict.

5. For the development of the Győr program see Macartney, *October Fifteenth*, 1:212–15; and Sipos, "Az Imrédy kormány megalakulásának történetéről," p. 70.

6. Macartney, *October Fifteenth*, 1:107.

Even after the Berlin visit Kánya remained opposed to open, accelerated rearmament, and was thus excluded from the planning sessions for the Győr program. In Hungary's foreign relations, however, Kánya permitted no fundamental change in response to the Berlin visit. He was indeed gratified by the various assurances obtained from Hitler, but was not about to forget that the promises of Nazi Germany were not always honored. Although he was eager to stay in the good graces of Berlin and thereby gain the Felvidék should Czechoslovakia disintegrate from internal disorder or German pressure, Kánya remained intent on maintaining a firm neutrality between England and Germany, and avoiding participation in a military conflict on Germany's side. Despite the insistence of the military, there would be no formal or informal military agreement with Berlin.⁷ Thus, in the same conversation in which Hitler had stated his views on the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, Kánya had made it a point to assert that "Hungary had no intention whatever of achieving her revisionist aims by force of arms and thereby unleashing a European war."⁸

In early 1938, time seemed to be available for Kánya to piece together a complex foreign policy mosaic, which, once the European crisis arrived, would theoretically permit Hungary to move in the direction most advantageous to her national interests. None of the Hungarians felt a sense of imminent crisis. Hitler had hinted strongly about the need to find "solutions" to the Austrian and Czech questions, but had apparently suggested no precise timetable. It was thus concluded that earlier information obtained from German military sources, which suggested that 1940 would be the critical year for Czechoslovakia, remained accurate.⁹ Hence Kánya could make his confident prediction about the favorable prospects for peace in 1938.

The events of March shattered this illusion. Austria's absorption into the Reich, achieved with great celerity and only minor protests from the Western powers, had profound implications for Hungary. Jubilation in pro-German

7. At about this time Kánya told Gusztáv Gratz, a leading Hungarian political figure, that he intended "to preserve complete freedom of action" in his foreign policy. "He had therefore not tied himself to any side by any kind of military agreement; he was waiting rather to see which group of states would be stronger at the end of rearmament. Only then would he orient himself in a definite direction, and it would be the one where Hungarian interests would best be guaranteed." Kánya's remarks are recorded in an Austrian document of the period, found among the papers of Theodor Hornbostel, head of the Political Section of the Austrian Foreign Ministry. German Foreign Ministry Records, National Archives Microcopy T120, 2935/568771. This group of Austrian documents, found among the records of the German Foreign Ministry after World War II, will hereafter be cited as AD.

8. *DGFP D*, vol. 5, no. 149.

9. For references to Hungarian impressions of the timing of a future crisis, see AD, 2935/568512-513, and the later remarks of General Rátz to General Keitel as recorded in an August 1938 memorandum of Rátz's. Collection of Hungarian Political and Military Records, National Archives, Microcopy T973 (Washington, D.C., 1966), roll 15, 345.

and Right Radical circles contrasted sharply with the alarm and dejection among those who feared German political and ideological expansion. Above all, however, Hitler's bold move served to focus the attention of politically aware Hungarians on Czechoslovakia, which more than one political observer now regarded as the "next item" on Germany's program for expansion.

The interwar Czechoslovak-Hungarian relationship, which cannot be fully explored here, had been a sad story of mutual suspicions and recriminations. In the aftermath of the Anschluss, even those few Hungarians whose dread of a *Drang nach Osten* had led them to advocate a Danubian triangle (Austria, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia) as a barrier against Germany, abandoned the effort as futile. They thus joined the government conservatives who had already begun to conceive of Hungary's line of defense against Germany as the Carpathians and not the Erzgebirge. Even the moderates were now coming to see a dual advantage in the collapse of the Czechoslovak state: it would represent not only a significant first step in the restoration of the historic Kingdom of Saint Stephen but also the best guarantee, in the form of a common Polish-Hungarian border, against future German moves eastward.

In the spring of 1938 policy-makers in Budapest were thus pondering what role Hungary could or should play in a future dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. For the militant officers in the General Staff, the need for detailed planning of possible military operations in Slovakia was becoming acute. A plan, first advanced in the 1920s, for fomenting rebellion in Slovakia and dispatching Hungarian troops to "restore order," was now resuscitated. There was also talk in Right Radical circles, especially among the more militant members of Ferenc Szálasi's Arrow Cross Party, of the formation of a free corps which at the proper time might cross the border into Slovakia and serve as an advance guard for regular army units.¹⁰ As a background to this kind of planning the Defense Ministry embarked on the rearmament program which Darányi had announced in March, although it was clear that the impact of the program was not to be felt before the end of the year.

In Berlin, Minister Döme Sztójay, former General Staff officer who served as an unofficial spokesman for his military colleagues, was engaged in assiduous activities aimed at convincing the Germans of Hungary's eagerness to participate in the impending conflict. On numerous occasions he stressed the need for formal joint staff talks to coordinate a march into

10. Some details of this plan, which was being developed with the cooperation of General Homlok of the General Staff, are found in the manuscript diary of Ferenc Szálasi (letter of Apr. 11, 1938). This manuscript, as well as other Hungarian documents and personal correspondence deposited by C. A. Macartney at St. Antony's College Library (Oxford, England), was used with the kind permission of Professor Macartney. This collection of documents will hereafter be cited as Macartney Archive.

Czechoslovakia. Although Hitler and Ribbentrop declined to discuss this delicate subject with the Hungarians, fearing that confidential information might be leaked to other parties, there is little doubt that Sztójay's activities were taken to reflect the eagerness of the Hungarian government to participate in a future military campaign against Czechoslovakia.¹¹

The Hungarian Foreign Ministry, unaware of Sztójay's unauthorized initiative, meanwhile worked under Kánya's direction to guide the country along a path that would not lead to any situation in which military forces would have to be employed. An important element in this policy was the effort made to convince Great Britain to take an active interest in East Central European affairs. There were to be found in Hungarian society, with the exception of the Right Radical faction, a reservoir of enduring faith in English fairmindedness and common sense, an admiration for English culture, and a respect for the powerful Royal Navy. Two decades of neglect of Danubian Europe by Britain had not eroded her good standing there.

Hungary's conservatives were hopeful of gaining the outright support, or at least benevolent neutrality, of London toward their revisionist program. The ideal solution, propounded by Count Bethlen in 1937, was German-British collaboration in the remaking of the map of East Central Europe to the benefit of both Germany and Hungary.¹²

Yet the attempt in 1938 to win British support for Hungarian aspirations faced formidable obstacles and in the end proved fruitless. If the hopes of the pro-Western Hungarians for the benevolent intervention of England in Danubian affairs were to materialize, it was necessary that the British be convinced that Hungary was a friendly independent state, which, if properly strengthened through fulfillment of "just" territorial demands, would be able to play a vital role in any eastern barrier against German expansion. But the Hungarians began with a severe handicap. As early as March 1938 most of the high officials in the British Foreign Office had come to the conclusion that Hungary was "riddled with Nazism" and "obsequiously servile" to Germany.¹³

The Hungarian conservatives did not at first realize that the chances for British support of their aspirations were so bleak. In early May, Béla Imrédy was chosen by the regent to replace Darányi, partly because of his pro-Western sympathies and close ties with the British financial world. Despite a growing willingness to compromise with the Right Radicals on domestic matters, first manifested in the preparation of the Győr program,

11. *Allianz*, no. 48. *DGFP D*, vol. 2, nos. 65, 66; vol. 5, no. 180.

12. *Pesti Napló*, Aug. 20, 1937.

13. Marginal notes by Sir Andrew Nobles, a second secretary in the Foreign Office, on a dispatch of Sir Basil Newton, British minister in Prague, Apr. 5, 1938, PRO, R3688/719/21. See also a Foreign Office minute of Mar. 22, PRO, R3105/626/21.

Imrédy remained throughout the summer of 1938 committed to Kánya's "free-hand" policy. As prime minister he strove diligently to arouse British sympathy for the difficult task confronting the Hungarian government. In a variety of ways, including a more conciliatory policy in negotiations with the Little Entente, Imrédy attempted to demonstrate that Hungary, though weak in every sense, intended to maintain its sovereignty and resist absorption by Germany. Again and again he explained to British visitors that Hungarians valued London's advice and wished to make England an important pillar in Hungarian foreign policy.¹⁴

To help dispel the notion that Hungary was "riddled with Nazism," Imrédy moved vigorously to suppress the overt activity of Right Radical groups. An earlier order by Regent Horthy prohibiting political activity by military officers was extended in May to civil servants. Szálasi was put on trial for subversive activities and given a prison sentence.

The effort to interest Great Britain in the remaking of the map of Danubian Europe was overshadowed in the spring of 1938 by an even more pressing task, a fathoming of the immediate plans of Hitler. After the March events in Austria, it was perilous to predict what the Führer might do. If, as Kánya had once observed, the Nazi leadership had a propensity for "hysteria" and "universal madness" and thrived on "political sensations,"¹⁵ a military move into Czechoslovakia already in 1938 could not be entirely ruled out. The information reaching Budapest in the spring, however, seemed to indicate that Hitler intended to "tighten the noose" around Czechoslovakia in gradual stages rather than to launch a blatant frontal attack. An "inner disruption" of Czechoslovakia, achieved without open Reich German intervention, seemed to be the goal of his policy.¹⁶ An unexpected incident, such as a bloody clash between Sudeten Germans and Czechs, might tempt the Führer to move sooner, but it seemed more likely that a conflict would be avoided at least until Germany's Rhine defenses were completed in late 1939.¹⁷

When the underlying tensions of the post-Anschluss period burst to the surface in the perplexing "weekend crisis" in mid-May, the Hungarians

14. See, for example, the record of Imrédy's conversation with Sir R. Glynn in August, PRO, R7505/1022/12.

15. Report of Knox, Apr. 9, 1936, PRO, R2315/84/21.

16. This was the conclusion of Sztójay, the Hungarian minister in Berlin, after conversations with many high German officials. His report is found in *DIMK*, vol. 2: *A müncheni egyezmény létrejötte és Magyarország külpolitikája, 1936-1938*, ed. Magda Ádám (Budapest, 1965), nos. 142, 145.

17. This conclusion was based in part on a report from Colonel Andorka, head of Hungarian Military Intelligence, who received a confidential briefing from General Keitel in April. See Knox's report of Apr. 23, 1938, PRO, C3591/1941/18; and the marginal comments (presumably Kánya's) on *DIMK*, vol. 2, no. 186.

were therefore greatly surprised and alarmed. Above all, the crisis tended to deepen the ambiguity which had marked Hungary's policy over the past year. On the one hand, Prague's unprovoked massing of troops on the Hungarian border, so unpleasantly reminiscent of similar action in the early 1920s, was bitterly resented and tended to extinguish any lingering sympathy for Czechoslovakia as the upcoming victim of German intimidation. On the other hand, the May crisis convinced important Hungarian leaders that the West would indeed come to the defense of Czechoslovakia if Germany marched in.¹⁸ If in a future conflict Hungary ranged herself on Berlin's side, she would doubtless find herself at war with Great Britain, a possibility that Horthy, Imrédy, and Kánya fervently wished to avoid.

Increased nervousness in Hungarian conservative circles was soon reflected in subtle policy changes. Greater stress was placed on the negotiations with the Little Entente that Kánya had begun a year earlier,¹⁹ and British and American diplomats were advised that Hungary intended to "play a lone hand" in a future Central European conflict. Neutrality would be adhered to as long as possible, and only if Czechoslovakia were clearly disintegrating would Hungary act to make sure Slovakia reverted to the Kingdom of Saint Stephen.²⁰

This increased circumspection in Budapest was in direct contrast to the belligerent mood in which Hitler emerged from the May crisis. Now determined to "smash Czechoslovakia by military action in the near future," he sketched in late May a swift military action in which Hungary would participate.²¹ Hitler at this time did not make it clear to his colleagues, let alone the Hungarians, what precise role Hungary might play in such an operation. It seems highly unlikely, however, that he regarded the military assistance of a virtually impotent Hungary as crucial. Rather, it appears that he hoped a simultaneous Hungarian (and perhaps Polish) military intervention would produce a desirable psychological effect, heightening the impression in Western Europe that the victim was an artificial and unstable

18. Knox told Kánya that his government had intervened in Berlin to urge cooperation in a peaceful settlement. Germany could not count on England's standing aside in case of a conflagration brought on by her rash actions. *DIMK*, vol. 2, no. 215.

19. This was done in part to satisfy the British government, which in April had formally urged Hungary and her neighbors to make a special effort to reach a settlement of their differences at an early date. PRO, R3691/R4309/178/21; *DIMK*, vol. 2, no. 161.

20. Report of John F. Montgomery, American ambassador in Budapest, June 2, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1938*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C., 1955), pp. 55–56; and Knox's report, June 26, PRO, R5926/626/21.

21. Wolfgang Foerster, *Ein General kämpft gegen den Krieg: Aus nachgelassenen Papieren des Generalstabschefs Ludwig Beck* (Munich, 1949), pp. 88–90; *DGFP D*, vol. 7, appendix 3(v).

structure whose preservation was not worth the risk of a European conflict. In any case, Hitler felt that the details of Hungarian participation could be settled at the last minute when Horthy visited Germany in late August. The Führer, doubtless recalling the avid interest that Ambassador Sztójay had been showing in a joint German-Hungarian military campaign, apparently believed that the Hungarians were so eager to participate that even a few weeks advance notice would be sufficient.²²

During the summer of 1938 the European situation, viewed from Budapest, seemed relatively calm and to a certain extent propitious. England was showing increased interest in East Central European affairs, as was demonstrated in July when Lord Runciman was dispatched to Czechoslovakia in an attempt to avert a crisis. Until August only reassuring words emanated from German spokesmen. The usually loquacious and belligerent Marshal Göring remained silent on Hitler's decision, indicating to Sztójay only that the Czechoslovak crisis was one to two years away, rather than three to four.²³

In early August, however, shortly before the important state visit of Regent Horthy to Germany, Hungarian optimism about the course of events was once again badly shattered. For the first time information reached Budapest of Hitler's belligerent plans and the internal debate that had been brewing in Germany during the course of the summer. Those Germans who were intent on preventing Hitler from plunging the nation into a dangerous conflict were by late summer becoming desperate, and the outlines of a military conspiracy were beginning to appear. Two men prominent in this activity, Admiral Canaris and General Beck, had close ties with important Hungarian officials, and it was decided that an attempt should be made to inform Budapest of the gravity of the situation and forestall any cooperation that the impetuous Horthy might otherwise offer during his talks with Hitler. Sometime in the first two weeks of August general information must have been given to the Hungarians by the German dissidents, for on August 14 a Foreign Ministry official solemnly told a member of the British embassy in Budapest that war was "quite certain" unless Lord Runciman could spin out his investigation until "at least November," when climatic conditions would be unfavorable for a military campaign.²⁴

More precise information was given by Colonel Helmuth Groscurth, a key figure among the dissidents, who arrived in Budapest on August 20, one

22. For a more detailed examination of Hitler's conception of Hungary's role in his plans see this author's "The Hungarian State Visit to Germany of August, 1938: Some New Evidence on Hungary in Hitler's Pre-Munich Policy," *Canadian Slavic Studies*, 3, no. 4 (Winter 1969): 683-84.

23. *Allianz*, no. 48.

24. Letter of A. D. Gascoigne, secretary in the British Legation in Budapest, to the Foreign Office, PRO, C8473/1941/18.

day before the departure of the Hungarian delegation. According to Groscurth, Hitler was irrevocably determined to settle accounts with Czechoslovakia by the "end of September or beginning of October," despite the objections of his military advisers and the pacific mood of the German people.²⁵

The impact of these confidential reports on the Hungarians was profound. The one development that Horthy, Kánya, and Imrédy most dreaded was a war over the Czechoslovak question brought on by blatant German aggression. France, and probably Britain, would intervene, and Hungary would be placed in the most dangerous of positions, open perhaps to an unprovoked attack by Rumania and Yugoslavia. Particularly disturbing was the realization that Hitler's own chief of staff and director of military intelligence rejected his plans. In these circumstances, it was decided that the Hungarian party during its visit in Germany would resist any attempt to be drawn into Hitler's plans for a rapid military action. To avoid irritating the Führer unduly, the Hungarians were prepared to imply that they would be interested in active participation in a "settling of accounts" at some later date. The fall of 1938, however, was "not very suitable," since Hungary was simply not ready to risk a war.²⁶ In addition, Horthy, who two years earlier had no doubt spoken to Hitler of his hostility to Czechoslovakia, the "cancerous tumor" in Danubian Europe,²⁷ now resolved to dissuade Hitler from embarking on a military adventure in the current unfavorable circumstances.

This was the attitude which Horthy adopted, albeit not without ambivalent feelings, in his conversations with Hitler during the visit in Germany.²⁸ Ignoring the Führer's offer of Slovakia as a reward for military cooperation in an attack on Czechoslovakia, Horthy bluntly voiced the opinion that the West would not remain indifferent. War would be inevitable, and Great Britain, because of her powerful navy, would eventually emerge triumphant. Even General Rátz, whom Hitler sought out as a more likely supporter of his belligerent plans, hesitated to diverge from the position previously agreed on by the political leadership. Hungary was thus dropped temporarily from Hitler's strategy.

25. Helmuth Groscurth, *Tagebücher eines Abwehroffiziers, 1938-1940*, ed. Helmut Krausnick and Harold C. Deutsch (Stuttgart, 1970), p. 102; *DIMK*, vol. 2, no. 292.

26. The argument that Hungary was militarily unprepared was certainly a cogent one. A quick inquiry by Horthy into the progress of rearmament revealed that the army was still in a very low state of readiness. Conditions were not suitable for either an offensive or a defensive war. See *The Confidential Papers of Admiral Horthy*, ed. Miklós Szinai and László Szűcs (Budapest, 1965), p. 131 (hereafter cited as *Horthy Papers*). See also János Csima, "Adalékok a horthysta vezérkarnak az ellenforradalmi rendszer háborús politikájában betöltött szerepéről," *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények*, 15, no. 3 (1968): 495.

27. *Horthy Papers*, p. 89.

28. The following paragraph is based on Sakmyster, "Hungarian State Visit," pp. 677-91.

When the Hungarians returned to Budapest, they tried, without complete success, to conceal their nervousness over the situation. In fact, Kánya, whose influence had been dominant in the decision to thwart Hitler, began privately to spread the word that "that madman [Hitler] wanted to unleash a war, whatever the cost."²⁹ British diplomats were informed in general terms of the gravity of the situation, and Kánya indicated to the French ambassador that Hungary would remain neutral if Germany attacked Czechoslovakia and would refuse a request for transit rights, bowing only to superior force.³⁰

Viewed in retrospect, it is clear that Hungary's policy during September bore the clear stamp of Kánya's "free-hand" policy. The attempt was made to keep Hungary uncommitted and ready to move in the direction dictated by the course of events. But "straddling the fence" became more and more difficult as the crisis began to mount after Hitler's uncompromising speech on September 12. The dimensions of Hungary's revisionist dilemma were now becoming quite clear. Clinging tenaciously to the highly ambitious goal of significant territorial gains, the government took upon itself the impossible task of pleasing both Great Britain and Germany, who were exhorting Hungary to opposite courses of action. The British were urging moderation and passivity, and the Germans, especially after September 16, were calling for violence and belligerence.

To complicate matters further for Hungary's conservative leadership, the critical developments in Czechoslovakia prompted Right Radical and chauvinist groups to press vociferously for government action. Some officers were vigorously advocating offensive military action, despite the state of rearmament and the misgivings of their German colleagues. One staff officer, Lieutenant Colonel Homlok, who had toyed earlier with a plan to manufacture an incident that would draw Hungary into the conflict, now began to implement the earlier scheme for organizing a free corps composed of volunteers from the Arrow Cross and similar Right Radical organizations. Later in the month these recruits were deployed along the Slovak border, but they played no active role until October and November.³¹

On the diplomatic front, the first part of September saw Hungarian representatives make repeated, almost pathetic, appeals to British fairmindedness and understanding. It would be most unfortunate, British representatives were told, if the impression was conveyed to the world that Britain supported

29. András Hory, *A kulissák mögött: A második világháború eredményei ami és ahogy a valóságban történt* (Vienna, 1965), p. 33.

30. Reports of Knox and Gascoigne, Aug. 31, Sept. 2, PRO, R7339/719/21 and C9178/1841/18; *DIMK*, vol. 2, no. 305; and German Foreign Ministry Records, National Archives Microcopy T120, Translated Czech Documents, 1809/412367-368.

31. Loránt Tilkovszky, *Revisió és nemzetiségpolitika Magyarországon, 1938-1941* (Budapest, 1967), p. 27. For Homlok's plan see Groscurth, *Tagebücher*, pp. 108-9.

the German minority of Czechoslovakia but not the other minorities, solely because the former "had more bayonets behind them."³² Such a discriminatory solution, Imrédy lamented to a British friend, would proclaim the triumph of force over justice and would have disastrous consequences in Hungary. The country would be thrown into the arms of Germany, for Hungarians would think that only a government of the extreme Right, one that would really be "in Germany's pocket," would have any chance for territorial revision.³³

Yet the incessant Hungarian reminders and messages seemed to have no impact on Neville Chamberlain. When the prime minister journeyed to Berchtesgaden, willing to consider a plebiscite for the German minority, he was convinced that the crisis could be resolved on the basis of self-determination for the Germans alone, with the other minorities left to work out with Prague an arrangement for continued participation in a Czechoslovak state.³⁴ In a subsequent cabinet session in London on September 17 there did in fact seem to be a recognition that if self-determination was accorded all minorities, the inevitable consequence would be the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. But Chamberlain and his fellow cabinet members, reluctant to discuss such an unpleasant possibility, skirted the issue, and the tacit assumption seemed to be that the solution proposed for the Bohemian Germans would not extend to the other minorities.³⁵

This was precisely the development that the Hungarians had been working so frantically to prevent. Ironically, Hitler also was frustrated by the course of events. Having failed to impress on Chamberlain the need for a "total solution" in Czechoslovakia, he was now confronted by an unexpected predicament. All along he had been aiming at a complete partition of Czechoslovakia. The British were now willing to sanction the annexation of the Sudetenland, but Hitler really wanted a "strategic border," that is the whole of Bohemia and Moravia. To surmount this obstacle, he apparently decided to revert to his former tactic of exploiting ethnic diversity throughout Czechoslovakia in order to foment civil war and create conditions for intervention by Hungary and Poland, as well as the Reich.

Renewed German pressure on Hungary reached its zenith on September 20, when Hitler summoned Kánya and Imrédy to Berchtesgaden for a final attempt to rouse the hesitant Magyars to a forceful participation.³⁶ Hitler

32. *DIMK*, vol. 2, no. 363; *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939*, ed. E. L. Woodward et al., series 3, vol. 3 (London, 1951), no. 7 (hereafter cited as *DBFP*).

33. PRO, C11417/2319/12.

34. See Chamberlain's comments during the cabinet meeting of Sept. 14, PRO, Cabinet Minutes, 23-95.

35. *Ibid.*

36. No direct German record exists, but see *DGFP D*, vol. 2, no. 554, as well as

stated his position in blunt terms: he was determined to settle the Czech question within three weeks, even at the cost of war. The best solution was the destruction of Czechoslovakia, since in the long run "it was quite impossible to tolerate the existence of this aircraft carrier in the heart of Europe." Hitler cautioned, however, that there was always the "danger" of the Czechs submitting to his harsh demands. If in the upcoming talks he received a proposal for the detachment of the Sudetenland without a plebiscite, "he would have no moral claim to put forward further demands before the world or his own people, and he could not make his attitude dependent on the treatment of the other nationalities." To prevent this situation, which would be "critical" for the Hungarians, Hitler suggested that Hungary move "fast as lightning" to bring its claims to the attention of the world. The best approach would be an outright demand that Prague cede the Magyar areas to Hungary. He would present his own demands with "brutal frankness," and would send in German troops if disturbances broke out. At that time, Hitler recommended, Hungary should also intervene militarily.

Imrédy's response, like Horthy's in August, was negative. He listed the various measures his government had taken to support the position of the Magyars of Slovakia, but stated that Hungary could not go beyond this. Like Germany in the May crisis, Hungary in the present one was not prepared. She had been led to expect that the "settling of accounts" was still one or two years away. Before her stood forces five times stronger, and the responsibility of Imrédy's government was enormous. Just as Hitler had to pursue a "German policy," he, as Hungarian prime minister, had to promote a "Hungarian policy."

Hitler's precise reaction to Imrédy's comments is not known. But from later incidents it is clear that he regarded Hungary's relatively calm and moderate conduct in the days after September 20 as far from satisfactory. In the Führer's later judgment, Hungary, by her relative inactivity, had prevented him from "laughing in Chamberlain's face" at Godesberg, had forced him to accept the Munich treaty, and had given Czechoslovakia a new lease on life.³⁷

Though Imrédy and Kánya of course made no mention of it in their discussion with Hitler, it is certain that a fear of the impact in Hungary of participation in a military operation against Czechoslovakia also helped to mold their policy of restraint. Mobilization of the army and an unprovoked attack on Czechoslovakia would doubtless embolden chauvinist and Right Radical groups in Hungary. There would be the grave danger of a military takeover, as crucial decisions passed inexorably from the diplomats and minis-

DIMK, vol. 2, no. 413. This account is based in part on a copy of Imrédy's personal record, which is found in the Macartney Archive (see note 10).

37. *DGFP D*, vol. 5, no. 272; Macartney, *October Fifteenth*, 1:263.

ters to the soldiers.³⁸ In such an eventuality, those leaders who had advocated moderation and caution would find their authority gravely undermined.

It was this consideration, coupled with a lingering faith in British fair play and the recognition of Hungary's military inferiority, that persuaded the Hungarian leadership to maintain its uncommitted position in the days before Munich. It is significant that beginning around September 19 understanding of Hungary's problem seemed to be growing in London. On that day Sir Thomas Moore, a long-time friend of the Hungarian conservatives, conveyed to the Hungarian minister an important message from Chamberlain. In his note the prime minister suggested that there was no cause for anxiety in Budapest, since he was "carefully keeping Hungary's situation in mind." He expressed approval of Hungary's peaceful and calm attitude up to that point, and urged that it be continued.³⁹

Chamberlain's friendly message was reinforced on September 24 when Lord Halifax advised the Hungarians that the fact that London was absorbed in the Sudeten German problem did not imply that Hungary's claim would be neglected. As long as Budapest refrained from seeking an immediate settlement by direct action, the Hungarian government could be confident that their claims would be the "focus of attention" at the "appropriate time."⁴⁰

These manifestations of what appeared to be growing British understanding for Hungarian policy convinced Kánya that the best course of action was to await patiently the moment when London would turn her attention to the Magyar problem in Czechoslovakia.⁴¹ This decision necessitated a final rebuff to the Germans. On September 26 Ribbentrop bluntly warned that Germany had done all it could, and the rest was up to Hungary. He strongly advised that if fighting erupted, Hungary should join in immediately. The Hungarian reply, once again, was negative.⁴²

Two days later, when it seemed that war was imminent, the crisis had its now familiar dénouement. Word of the Munich conference was greeted with much relief all over Europe, not the least in Hungary. Kánya's hope for a diplomatic solution was apparently about to be realized. The prospects for a settlement favorable to Hungary were sanguine: Mussolini was offering to

38. Such a possibility was by no means remote. In January 1938 a representative of the officer corps had urged Regent Horthy to abolish Parliament and establish an autocratic government resting for its support on the army and right-wing parties. Horthy refused to cooperate, but the officers remained restless. See Macartney, *October Fifteenth*, pp. 212–14.

39. *DIMK*, vol. 2, no. 365. No record of Chamberlain's message could be traced in the PRO files.

40. *DIMK*, vol. 2, p. 392; *DBFP*, vol. 3, no. 44.

41. See Kánya's remark to Knox on September 26, *DBFP*, vol. 3, nos. 51, 52.

42. *DIMK*, vol. 2, nos. 397, 411. A later Hungarian memorandum (*Allianz*, no. 48) alleges that Sztójay told Ribbentrop that Hungary would march with Germany, but this appears to be a misrepresentation.

champion their cause, the British attitude had been encouraging, and there was no reason to think Hitler would be hostile. It did appear, as the Duce solemnly pronounced, that it was a "good day for Hungary."⁴³

At the conference, however, no one, except Mussolini, was eager to tackle the complex and volatile problem of territorial changes in Slovakia. Daladier, Chamberlain, and Hitler preferred to wash their hands of the embarrassing matter. A protocol attached to the Munich Treaty stipulated that the Four Powers would deal with the question only if Czechoslovakia and Hungary could not come to terms in three months.

Their work accomplished, the leaders of the Munich powers returned home, Hitler to rue his missed opportunity and Chamberlain, having forgotten all the British promises that the Hungarian problem would be the "focus of attention" at the "appropriate time," to proclaim "peace with honor." The Hungarians had little to make them rejoice, especially when their Polish friends used an ultimatum and military intimidation to coerce Prague, already on October 1, to cede the Teschen territory. To preserve appearances, Horthy dispatched rather fulsome letters of gratitude to Hitler and Göring, but privately there were many expressions of bitterness and despair. It was indeed truly ironic that Hungary, which in the face of a painful revisionist dilemma had wavered between serving the interests and heeding the advice of Germany and England, should find that in the end neither country showed the slightest interest in Hungary's aspirations.

In a speech on October 1, Prime Minister Imrédy likened Hungary's past and future path to a "narrow mountain ridge with yawning abysses to right and to left of it."⁴⁴ On the one side was "irresponsible adventure," on the other "cowardly renunciation." Imrédy emphasized that Hungary would continue to avoid falling into either side of the abyss, but his experiences of the past month had convinced him and many other formerly cautious and pro-Western Hungarians that the army officers had been right: Hungary had been relying a little too much on "renunciation" and not enough on "adventure." The Munich decision did not bring in its wake a military or fascist dictatorship in Hungary, but it did badly discredit the "free-hand" policy Kánya had advocated. Refusal to cooperate wholeheartedly with Hitler, the attempt to solicit British support, and reliance on diplomatic rather than military maneuvers had left Hungary empty-handed. As a result, many Hungarians who had struggled with the difficult dilemma of a revisionist policy now came to the conclusion that a generous dose of "irresponsibility" in foreign policy would not be such a bad thing after all.

43. *DIMK*, vol. 2, no. 423.

44. Parts of Imrédy's speech appear in English translation in *Documents on International Affairs, 1938*, ed. Monica Curtis, 2 vols. (London, 1942-43), 2:345-46.