

CHAPTER ONE

THE DISSOLUTION OF HISTORIC HUNGARY AND THE PEACE TREATY OF TRIANON (1918–1920)

THE DISSOLUTION OF HISTORIC HUNGARY

In one of the first scenes of the 1935 Hungarian musical comedy motion picture: *A címzett ismeretlen* [Addressee Unknown], a young Austrian boy, visiting Hungary for the first time, meets an attractive young Hungarian girl on the train. The young lady accompanies the young man to a hotel in Balatonföldvár. As a step toward getting to know each other and to practice his Hungarian, the young man reads aloud about Hungarian geography from a 1912 edition of a conversation booklet: “Hungary is surrounded by high mountains, the Carpathians... Its a sister country to Croatia-Slavonia. Its largest lake is the Balaton and it extends to the Adriatic at the port of Fiume.” The girl smiles and looks up to the sky, “*So war’s, so wird’s sein!*”

“*Így volt, így lesz!*” [So it was, so it will be] was the slogan inscribed on the shield of the Védő Ligák Szövetsége [Association of Defense Leagues], established in 1920 to demand the restoration of Hungary’s territorial integrity. On the shield, the slogan surrounded a red heart symbolizing the map of historic Hungary. How come that such a well-known slogan of Hungarian irredentism appeared in this frothy comedy that had no political agenda of any kind? This work was simply a showplace for the boilerplate clichés of Hungarian light comedy movie-making. Was it not strange that the acquaintance of the two young people began with an unmistakable political message? Hungari-

an motion picture production in the 1930s was largely limited to comedies. Political and particularly foreign policy comments were practically unheard of in these films. The question is obviously rhetorical. The moviegoers clearly understood the political comment as a cliché, but this did not bother their enjoyment of the film. The brief dialog did not affect the story line and appeared only as a passing theatrical episode. It was obviously not a coincidence that the producers of the movie put these words on the lips of the protagonists. They knew that the recognition of the sentence would draw the viewers even closer to the story, right from its beginning.

For the fifteen years since 1920 these slogans, born from the deep resentment about the Treaty of Trianon which had dismembered Hungary, were on everybody's lips. The "*Nem! Nem! Soha!*" [No, no, never!], "*Mindent vissza!*" [Return everything!], "*Csonka Magyarország nem ország, egész Magyarország mennyország*" [Rump Hungary is no country, heaven's is our old Hungary], "*Hiszek Magyarország feltámadásában*" [I believe in the resurrection of Hungary] and others were a daily part of the evolving emotional image of history and also of the political agenda. The slogans were trumpeted from public monuments, from street signs, from shopwindows, from the radio and from the newspapers. The symbols of irredentism appeared on household goods and on knick-knacks of all sorts and there was no day that anti-Trianon slogans or speeches were not heard in school, at festivities and at meetings. Every such statement suggested that the dismemberment of Hungary was only a temporary matter, a political absurdity, an accidental distortion of historical continuity that would be remedied in the near future.

This attitude, dominant in Hungarian public opinion between the two World Wars, was inclined to attribute the Treaty of Trianon to fate, treason, injustice, misleading, malevolence, intentional falsification of conditions and vengeance.

"The most cruel vivisection ever committed on a thousand-year-old cultured nation was due to artfully compiled calumnies, to ongoing, unilateral, purposefully false statements, and to deceptions and false explanations. It was also due to a chaos of distorted images of historical, economic and ethnographic facts which were created by an intentionally malignant phraseology." Thus wrote Gyula Wlassics,¹

former minister of culture and former president of the Upper House of parliament, just a few days before the treaty was signed. “The product of vengeance was cast into paragraphs: the Hungarian peace treaty is being signed now in Versailles,” were the first words in the editorial of *Népszava* [People’s Voice], the paper of the Hungarian Social Democratic Party, on June 4, 1920.² In his introductory speech in parliament, on April 19, 1921, the new prime minister, Count István Bethlen, castigated the leaders of the October revolution of 1918 and of the 1919 Bolshevik regime, by saying that during the revolutionary era after the World War, “Desperadoes appeared and took over the leadership of the country and this ultimately led the country into a catastrophe. Catilina-like persons came to the fore who ignored the interests of the nation and endeavored to link up with international trends and grasp the hand of our enemies in order to establish a power-base for themselves.”³

“The imperium of Saint Stephen was buried by anti-Hungarian propaganda” stated Ferenc Herczeg, the noted author, at a meeting proposing the establishment of a shrine to revision.⁴ József Horváth Körmendi, a popular public speaker who during 1928 and 1929 gave informational talks in several hundred villages, said that in the background of the Treaty of Trianon there were, “very skillful and very well financed Czech, Romanian, and Serb propaganda,...the misdeeds of the Károlyi regime and of the Commune [Soviet Republic],” combined with “the daring impertinence of surreptitiously entering brigands.”⁵ During the 1943 debate on the image of Hungarians abroad, József Balogh, the editor of the conservative *Magyar Szemle*—the most prestigious journal of the era—wrote, “Hungary did not lose the war on the battle fields but in the public opinion of Western Europe.”⁶

These explanations sought the causes for the collapse in external evil forces and when the first traces of self-criticism appeared these were also used to shift the responsibilities. This thesis appeared most effectively, albeit from a different perspective, in the writings of the historian, Gyula Szekfű, and of the Jesuit priest-ideologist Béla Bangha. They both saw the internal shortcomings in the disappearance of the old, great, conservative statesmen, the overenthusiastic acceptance of liberal ideas and in the decline of the quality of the new generation of politicians. These eventually led to irresponsible political adventures,

such as the liberal democratic revolution under Count Mihály Károlyi in the fall of 1918 and the Socialist—and Communist—led Soviet Republic in the spring of 1919.⁷ A role in the collapse was also played by some “genetic weaknesses” characteristic of the Hungarians. These included the blunting of the reflexes of self-preservation that prevented the nation from taking timely and effective steps against the forces threatening the integrity of the state. Another item that became the subject of feigned self-criticism by these authors was the naiveté and the trust with which the Hungarians viewed the western Great Powers, their own allies and the national minorities in their own country. This behavior implied altruism, pacifism, chivalry, and honesty—all originating from the positive national character of the Hungarians. It is evident that holding liberalism responsible for the catastrophe was in fact an excuse to legitimize the conservative regime that took power after the fall of the revolutions and it also served as an indictment of the political opponents of the new regime.

This entirely self-exculpatory explanation saw the causes for the collapse originating in the ingratitude and in the false propaganda of the minorities in Hungary, in the empire-building endeavors of the neighboring countries, in the ignorance, malevolence, and political blindness of the victorious powers and in the excessive trustfulness of the Hungarian nation. The recent judgment of an historian contradicts the validity of these arguments. Géza Jeszenszky writes,

Even though this sentiment might contain an element of truth, it is nevertheless self-deluding. Instead of objectively examining the past of the country it nurtures illusions and attributes the catastrophe of Hungary entirely to inauspicious external causes. To some extent the loss of Hungarian prestige and reputation led to the Treaty of Trianon. Its terms were not caused by satanic and evil machinations but could be attributed to national and international events and to the mostly irresistible forces of history.⁸

Indeed, the most important components of the road to Trianon consisted of the increasing political consciousness of the nationalities and the radicalization of their demands. Furthermore Hungary’s participation and defeat in World War I coupled by the desire for political, eco-

conomic and strategic security by the victorious powers. The outcome was that the Entente, their minor allies and the minorities wishing for independence all found that their interests demanded the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

The fidelity and attachment of the minorities to the concept of a Hungarian imperium became increasingly threadbare during the nineteenth century. Beginning at the end of the eighteenth century, dissatisfaction appeared first in the form of complaints about alleged injustices, then by increasing national self-consciousness among Serb, Croat, Romanian, and Slovak minorities. During the 1848–49 Revolution and War of Independence, Hungarian-Romanian and Hungarian-Serb armed clashes amounted to minor civil wars. This fragmentary opposition of the nationalities against Hungarian dominance showed clearly, decades prior to Trianon, that the evolving nationalities viewed themselves as political entities and acted accordingly. This was true and was further endorsed during most of the nineteenth century by the divisive policies of the Habsburgs who ruled over the multinational empire.

Hungarian leadership was aware of these difficulties and the nationality problem was one of the well-known, key issues of nineteenth century Hungarian political thought. It appeared in every national forum, from journalism, through administration to legislation. The leading role of the Hungarians in a single political nation, was not questioned from the Hungarian side. Yet at times there were ideas and even plans born out of necessity or idealism, backed by political convictions based on history, that did not view the mission of Hungary in the Carpathian Basin in the spirit of Saint Stephen's medieval monarchy that was willing to welcome all nationalities and all people in the realm, but did not grant them collective rights. These ideas and plans were voiced by such various figures as Count László Teleki, Lajos Kossuth, Baron József Eötvös, Baron Zsigmond Kemény, Lajos Mocsáry, and Oszkár Jászi.⁹ Their projects, however, never materialized and even after the Austrian-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 that established the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the 1868 nationality law reflecting liberal concepts and offering full individual freedom to all without any national or religious considerations was not fully respected in the counties and at the lower levels of administration. This fact, as well as the rigidity of the political structure of the Monarchy and of Hungarian domestic pol-

icy which denied the minorities appropriate parliamentary representation, increased their dissatisfaction.

By the end of the nineteenth century the nationality politicians were seeking allies in the attempts to break away, both among the Great Powers and also among the nation-states of their co-nationals on the other side of the Hungary's border. For, although Hungarian nationality policies were not harsh or oppressive when measured by general European standard, they were neither courteous nor forthcoming and thus were unacceptable to the nationality leaders and to the groups they represented who were already looking for autonomy or independence. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Hungarian government responded to the increased activity of the nationalities by urging assimilation and endeavored to achieve this by educational policies, by the promotion of the Hungarian language and culture and by the increasing control of the political and cultural organizations of the minorities. For the minorities in Hungary this represented a regressive step that increased the gravity of the conflict at a time when a growing number of ethnic groups experienced an increasing level of national consciousness. In these endeavors, the nationalities could count on the patronage of Pan-Slav Russia and of the independent states of Serbia, and Romania. The political strength of the autonomous Croatia, one of the countries within the Lands of the Hungarian Crown, was also a factor. Austria was besieged at the same period by similar problems originating from its Italian, Czech, and Polish minorities.

Starting in 1915–16, the course of World War I and the problem of the nationalities in the Monarchy became increasingly linked. This was due to the fact that by making territorial promises, the Entente powers were able to acquire new adherents and succeeded in drawing Italy and Romania into the war on their side. In the secret Treaty of London, signed on April 26, 1915, in exchange for Italy's entry into the war, Italy's right to a number of southern areas of the Monarchy and the strengthening of Italy's position in the Mediterranean were recognized. The areas assigned to Italy included Istria, with the exception of the port city of Fiume [Rijeka] at its western tip, which belonged to Hungary.¹⁰ In the secret Treaty of Bucharest, signed on August 17, 1916, Romania was promised territory reaching the Tisza River at its upper and lower reaches.¹¹ The two treaties enticed the two countries with ter-

ritories inhabited mostly by, Italian and Romanian populations respectively. Because the increasing rigidity of the front lines appeared to delay the end of the war beyond the previous expectations and also because the sacrifices in men and materials were likely to increase significantly, the belligerents were endeavoring to develop new weapons and technology while also attempting to find additional allies. It was under these circumstances that the Czech, Croat, and Serb émigré politicians increasingly offered themselves and their nation to the attention of the Entente. They promised the Entente that they would perform various diversionary tasks within the Monarchy, including surrender of the nationality troops, refusal to obey the mobilization orders and even setting up armed units willing to fight against the Monarchy. While these offers did not come close to equaling the military and political value of the Italian and Romanian armed force, they were not negligible. Consequently, the Entente officials negotiated with the emigrant circles about cooperation but made no commitments about future arrangements. During this period, the émigré politicians had ample opportunities to make elaborate plans concerning the postwar arrangements.¹²

The Czecho-Slovak demands were contained in a memorandum issued on 1 May 1915 by Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk,¹³ a jurist and a member of the Austrian parliament and also in the 1916 propaganda booklet of the attorney Edvard Beneš¹⁴ The pamphlets published by the two key figures of Czech emigration demanded not only the territory that was eventually granted to them at the Paris Peace Conference, but also large areas in the northern industrial region and also in western Hungary. This territory would have linked Czecho-Slovakia with the South Slav states that were about to be united and would have separated Hungary from Austria. The Yugoslav Committee in London, under the leadership of Ante Trumbić and Frano Supilo demanded all of Baranya County and beyond that a line from Szekszárd, via Baja and Szeged to the Maros [Mureş] River. It became evident that the Yugoslav and Romanian demands overlapped and this led at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 to a bitter struggle between the two countries.

The continuation of the war and the failure of the Austro-Hungarian peace feelers in March 1917 that were backed by Francis Joseph's successor, Charles, further improved the position of the émigré politi-

cians. At the end of the summer in 1918, the French, British and the United States recognized the Czecho-Slovak National Council as the founding organization of the yet to be established Czechoslovakia. This, in essence, granted the émigré politicians allied status and not only made it likely that their demands would be viewed favorably, but they also acquired the right to participate at the peace conference, in contrast to the defeated countries. This created a favorable situation for the minor allies and made it possible for them to present their demands from the position of victors.

The Austro-Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs offered an armistice to the United States on October 4, 1918, on the basis of the Wilson's Fourteen Points, which did not demand the break-up of the Monarchy. On October 18, Robert Lansing, the American secretary of state, responded and stated that the developments had made Wilson's points obsolete and that, "The President is, therefore, no longer at liberty to accept the mere 'autonomy' of these peoples as a basis of peace, but is obliged to insist that they, and not he, shall be the judges of what action on the part of the Austro-Hungarian Government will satisfy their aspirations."¹⁵ On the following day the telegram arrived at the Ballhausplatz ringing the death knell to the Dual Monarchy.

The day before Lansing's fateful message was sent to Vienna, in the Budapest Parliament, István Tisza, who in July 1914 reluctantly acquiesced to the start of a war against Serbia, declared "we have lost the war."¹⁶ Count Mihály Károlyi, as an opposition representative, had urged for some time that an end be put to the war. With defeat in sight, most came to assume that he would be the next prime minister. By the time he was given his mandate on October 31 Károlyi was already chairman of the revolutionary Hungarian National Council, which was set up on October 24. When he took his oath before Archduke Joseph August, representing King Charles IV as his *homo regius*, Károlyi claimed to take power not as the leader of the parliamentary opposition, but as the chairman of the National Council.

The three-party coalition government, with liberal, nationalist, and socialist ministers had inherited a complete domestic and foreign policy chaos. The Monarchy was dissolving, the reliability of the troops was questioned even by their officers and the country had increasingly critical supply problems. In addition there was the restlessness of the

nationalities which was manifested shortly in renewed declarations of independence.¹⁷

The Zagreb *Sabor* unanimously declared Croatia's secession on October 29 and on November 25 in Újvidék [Novi Sad] the Great Assembly of non-Hungarian representatives from Bácska [Bačka], Banat and Baranya [Baranja] declared that the parts of southern Hungary, by then occupied by Serb troops had become parts of the Kingdom of Serbia. On October 30, the Slovak National Council announced in Turócszentmárton [Turčiansky Svätý Martin] that it would unite with the Czech nation. The Transylvanian Romanians declared on December 1, in Gyulafehérvár [Alba Julia] that the territory inhabited by them had become a part of the Regat, i.e. of the Kingdom of Romania and the same step was taken by the Transylvanian Saxons in Medgyes [Mediasch, Mediaș] on January 8, 1919. While these declarations were primarily demonstrative rather than representative or democratic, they were nevertheless very important because they provided a basis for the actions of the occupying armies that were supporting the separatist movements. After the beginning of November 1918, first the Serb and then the Czech, and the Romanian armies invaded Hungary and their advances continued with minor interruptions, until August 1919.

Under these circumstances the Károlyi government could hardly be expected to accomplish anything beyond trying to mitigate the damage. With a sense of democratic and pacifist mission and an almost romantic enthusiasm it restructured the incompetent legislative process within two weeks. After Charles IV's abdication the republic was proclaimed, democratic reforms were announced, the reorganization of the administration was begun, and in order to clarify the applicable terms of the Armistice of Padua, the Belgrade Military Convention was signed with the Entente. The partial demobilization of the armed forces was begun and the nationality policies were put on a new foundation. Its projects for the introduction of territorial and cultural autonomy were regarded very progressive at the time and what might have been considered generous by the minority politicians some time earlier, proved to be unacceptable at this time. Oszkár Jászi, minister without a portfolio for nationality affairs, was unable to meet with the representatives of the Serb minority and at the November-December meetings with the representatives of the Slovak and Romanian nationalities

could not reach agreement on the matter of territorial autonomy offered on a federal basis. By this time, these nationalities expected complete territorial control and independence from Hungary. Acts X of 1918 and VI of 1919, proposed by Jászi and enacted on December 21 and January 27 respectively, were designed to regulate Ruthenian and German minority autonomy but remained completely ineffective.¹⁸ Act XXX of 1919 was also too late and is just a historical curiosity. It was inspired not by the influential Slovak National Council but by a group of pro-Hungarian Slovaks who were under the influence of Oszkár Jászi and who were dreaming about an autonomous eastern Slovak republic.

Throughout this time the government, having made pacifism its principal program, was reluctant to use military force against the invaders who had gone beyond the lines determined by the Belgrade Military Convention and who established their own administration in the occupied territories. The Károlyi government was severely criticized then, and even more severely later, for allegedly having signed an unfavorable military convention, disarmed the military and thus voluntarily relinquished all means of resisting the invading armies.¹⁹ Károlyi and Jászi, both then and later in emigration, considered their tactics to be the correct ones. Their policy stressed declarations of pacifism, peaceful gestures and the reconstruction of the country's administration along democratic lines. Jászi and Károlyi were convinced that by doing this they would generate sympathy for Hungary among the Allies who held all the trumps in this game. They were confident that this increase in sympathy would be manifested by a fair agreement at the peace conference and by increasingly friendly relations after the treaty had been signed. In these hopes they were deeply disappointed because both the French and the British failed to take note of the democratic government and instead viewed the Károlyi regime as one that continued to oppress the national minorities and therefore they refused to recognize it.²⁰

The peacemakers consistently approved the territorial conquests of their allies and on March 19, 1919, they sent to Budapest a *démarche*, decided upon in Paris on February 26, ordering the withdrawal of all Hungarian forces into an even more restricted area. The note, which was handed over to the Hungarians on the following day in the form of an ultimatum, also implied that the peace conference had reached a decision on the Hungarian borders.²¹ Accordingly, the authority of the

Hungarian government would have been restricted to an area approximately one third of Hungary's former territory. Károlyi, who in the interim had become the president of the republic and the cabinet of Dénes Berinkey, his prime minister, agreed that the Hungarian policy vis-à-vis the Entente had been a failure. The government formally rejected the note and resigned and Károlyi asked the Social Democrats to form a new government. He confidently assumed that the Socialist will garner the support of the Western working class via the International Socialist Commission, the heir to the defunct Socialist International. He also favored a Socialist-Communist deal, so that Soviet Russian troops would follow a policy of benevolent neutrality near Hungary's eastern borders. On March 21, 1919, the Socialists, in fact, decided to form a government with the Communists.

The Hungarian Soviet government was ruled by the Hungarian Socialist Party, a result of the fusion of the Hungarian Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party of Hungary. Budapest expected support from Moscow and, at the same time, tried to establish peaceful relations with the Entente. The commissar for foreign affairs, Béla Kun, informed the Entente about the new government and, in a message sent on March 24, he advised the Entente that, "The government of the Republic of Councils declare themselves [*sic*] ready to negotiate territorial questions on the basis of the principle of self-determination of the People, and they view territorial integrity solely as in conformity with that principle."²² At the beginning of April, the peace conference sent one of its most distinguished diplomats, the South African General Jan Christian Smuts, to Budapest but he could not convince Kun to accept more favorable demarcation lines than the one specified in the March 19 note. Consequently Paris authorized an advance by the Romanian troops to the line of the Tisza and this advance began on April 16. The Hungarian Soviet Republic, being unable to get any support from a civil war-torn Soviet Russia, was militarily and diplomatically left to its own devices and responded by accelerating the build-up of the Hungarian Red Army. It stopped the Romanian advance in the east and in May, after a successful one month campaign against the Czechoslovak army in the north, it extended the authority of the Soviet government to the limits of Hungarian ethnic boundary and, in some areas, even beyond it. These military successes proved to be transient, however, when in

response to the two telegraphic notes from French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, Kun backed off and made the exhausted Red Army withdraw from the occupied northern areas. The second Clemenceau note of June 13, categorically stated that the designated lines of demarcation, "are to be the frontiers permanently dividing Hungary from Czecho-Slovakia and from Roumania."²³ This was the first instance when Hungary was officially advised about territorial decisions that had been made at the peace conference. Subsequently the Romanian army went on the offensive along the Tisza. The Hungarian army was forced into retreat leading to the collapse of the Soviet government on August 1. On August 3–4 the Romanian troops entered Budapest. Most of the commissars successfully fled from Hungary.

Because both the pacifist policies and friendship toward the Entente by the Károlyi government and the communist orientation and armed actions by Kun's Soviet Republic led to complete failure, on August 7, a small self-appointed group of counter-revolutionaries, assisted by the occupying Romanian forces, arrested the interim government which consisted of uncompromised Socialist labor leaders. At that time there were six different power groups exerting political control in six areas of the country. The Czechoslovak army north of the Danube and the northern mountains; the Romanians in Transylvania, the Great Plain, in and around Budapest and the northern part of Transdanubia; and the Serbs south of a Dráva-Pécs-Baja-Szeged line. The rest of the country was governed, in principle, by the István Friedrich's new government but, in fact, the southern part of Transdanubia was under the authority of the National Army of Vice Admiral Miklós Horthy, while the western areas of Hungary were controlled by the troops under the command of the royalist Baron Antal Lehár. Because the peace conference did not recognize the Friedrich government but wished to sign a peace treaty with Hungary as soon as possible, it charged the British diplomat George Russell Clerk with assisting the formation of a broadly-based Hungarian coalition government and the withdrawal of the Romanian troops. As a consequence of Clerk's negotiations in the Romanian and Hungarian capitals, the Romanian troops left Budapest during the middle of November and on November 24 the so-called concentration government under Károly Huszár was formed. It was recognized and invited to the Paris Peace Conference on December 2, 1919.