It was only a few weeks before World War II broke out when Miklós Kállay, later to be Prime Minister of Hungary, at that time chairperson of an international conference meeting in Budapest, invited the participants for an evening walk on the Gellért Hill. Enchanted by the panorama from the hill and the moment of the descending dusk, the members of this prominent group were quite puzzled to hear his words: “Yes, Messieurs et Mesdames, it is a wonderful sight. Look at it well, for it is the last time you will see it. The royal palace, the bridges, all will be annihilated. What you see will be a heap of ruins.”

Aladár Szegedy-Maszák and István Bede – newly appointed heads of departments in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs from May 1943 – feel as if they have jumped on a coach which is running towards the edge of a cliff, and, what is more, they will be regarded responsible for the disaster.

These examples represent the feelings of a significant part of the Hungarian political elite of the time.

The reason for these sentiments was that Hungarian (foreign) policy was torn between a vast dichotomy between 1918/19 and 1945: until the total collapse in 1945, it could not and did not want to dispose of the dream of restoring Saint Stephen’s Hungary, while all of the more rational foreign policy makers were well aware of the fact that this grand objective could only be achieved with the help of a great power. Even as the fortune of war was turning against them, they still trusted in the benevolence of the Anglo-Saxon powers so that they could maintain the results of the territorial revisions of 1938–1941, while the anti-Nazi coalition basically demanded unconditional surrender.

In the spring of 1943, Szegedy-Maszák prepared a memorandum in compliance with the Prime Minister for the information of the Hungarian ministers accredited to neutral states, which reached the Foreign Office due to indiscretion. This document clearly reveals the views and visions of the contemporary Hungarian official circles of themselves and their international predeterminations. The author, however, gives up
the view of integral revision, but in contrast to the Czechoslovak–Polish and Greek–Yugoslavian federation agreements of the previous year, which enjoyed London’s approval, it proposes a plan of a Commonwealth of the Carpathian Basin which, although implicitly, envisions Hungarian domination. The response from London to this cognitive dissonance was very harsh: “If these are the ideas” wrote D. Allen in the Foreign Office “upon the basis of which the Hungarian government hope to enter into discussions with us, they still have a lot to learn.”

Hungary mainly owed its territorial gains to Adolf Hitler’s Germany, and this was the cause of its attachment to Germany (and not an identification with Nazism). The concept of the common fate of Hungarians and Germans was only accepted by a part of the Hungarian society, the other (rather larger than smaller) part rejected it. The reasons are deeply rooted in history. While the Czech lands lost their independence for three-hundred years, and Poland for a century and a half, Hungarians led a series of wars of independence against the Habsburgs. As a result of these, they enjoyed a higher degree of independence within the Habsburg Empire, and with the Compromise of 1867 they reached the status of co-nation until the collapse of 1918. Still, even today, the majority of the Hungarian society has such strong anti-Habsburg sentiments without any deliberation that it is still impossible to re-erect the statues of Maria Theresa or Francis Joseph, not only on the original spot on Heroes’ Square, but even in the vicinity. Fascinated by independence, the Hungarian society paid a huge price in the field of modernisation for insisting on the idea of St. Stephen’s Hungary.

Hungarian–German relations during World War II are also burdened with deep contradictions until the last minute. On the one hand, besides a large part of the society, many members of the governing elite are reluctant to take part in the war. They send the minimum of the armed forces against the Soviet Union in 1941, and wanted to withdraw from the Soviet front as early as September. In 1943, Ferenc Szombathelyi, born as Franz Knaus, Chief of the General Staff of the Hungarian Army would be ready to accept the German proposal to send occupying troops to the Balkans instead of the Soviet front, but his hidden intention is that it would make it easier to change sides when the British arrive there. On the other hand – since Russian occupation must be avoided at all costs as it would result in the elimination of the social system – the idea of the mutual interdependence of Hungarians and Germans also prevailed. Hungary is Germany’s only friend, and, of course – as the Hungarians believed – a friend of equal status. That is why Ferenc Szombathelyi, who does not have any political ambitions, asks Miklós Horthy, who had already turned his back on the Führer, for permission to negotiate with Hitler. Then he explains to the Führer that the occupation of Hungary would mean a major moral defeat for the Germans, as it would show the world that the Germans “handle their only friend, Hungary, in such a brutal way.”
Although the Führer had already disillusioned Gyula Gömbös in 1933 from the belief that he would follow Bismarck’s ideas about Hungary, i.e. being interested in an imperially strong Hungary, and then he even highlighted his opposite view with a number of facts, now the territorial changes of 1938–1941 seemed to make it forgotten to such an extent that it was not only Szombathely whom Hitler could lead by the nose on the eve of the occupation, claiming that he “wanted an independent and strong Hungary”, but – through Szombathelyi – he probably had an impact on Horthy to decide on his fatal mistake of maintaining his position as a regent.

In his work The Hungarian State, which was written on German order in 1916, Gyula Szekfű – the greatest figure of Hungarian historiography to date – incorporated the biography of the Hungarians into the Christian-German culture, and his historical synthesis published in the 1930s repeated the same concept in a largely expanded volume, but this was refused by such outstanding figures like Dezső Szabó, László Németh, Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky and István Bibó.

After 1919, while implementing its main task (i.e. to integrate Hungary into the new Europe of the age), Hungarian foreign policy makers made a number of (futile) attempts to raise Berlin’s attention; Prime Minister István Bethlen was not invited to the German capital until 1930. The Germany which assisted the revision was not the German Empire that Gyula Szekfű had envisioned. Among the many burdens on the Hungarian–German relations, the debates about the German minority in Hungary were the most serious. Germany mainly criticised the deficiencies of the education system, while Hungarians complained about the German minority’s weakening loyalty. In 1937, Gyula Szekfű referred to the example of Ede Schittenhelm, who had been killed in the siege of Buda in 1849 while fighting on the Hungarian side, to justify the common fate of Germans and Hungarians. His essay was received favourably by many, but the prominent writer Dezső Szabó dismantled it in a devastating article, while Nazi penetration further strengthened among the Germans in Hungary.

After regaining a large part of its historical territory, Hungary became a multinational country again. In the treatment of national minorities, however, the old attitudes prevailed again.

Did Hungary become a vassal of Germany?

It would be simple but misleading to answer with Edmund Veesenmayer’s words, who described the whole country as a large sabotage centre in his report of 10 December 1943.5

In the Western European sense of the word the answer is ‘yes’, as a French and Spanish vassal could preserve his human dignity even when subordinated to his lord. It was not so in East-Central Europe, where the vassal was called a servant, and it was even less so in the east, where the vassal threw himself at his lord’s feet.
Or, using the language of facts: almost simultaneously with the Second Vienna Award, the Hungarian government, still in Vienna, signs an agreement on national minorities, which makes the Volksbund the exclusive representative of German nationals in Hungary, thus seriously damaging the authority of the Hungarian state, which can only secretly help its German-speaking citizens who refuse dissimilation. In September 1940, it releases Ferenc Szálasi, the most well-known leader of the Arrow Cross movement, from prison, and then suspends the Prime Minister’s decree of 1938 which prohibited public servants to join extremist political parties. At the end of September, the Hungarian government gives permission to German “training troops” to cross Hungary on their way to Romania, after which Hungary becomes a deployment area of the German forces. In October, an economic agreement is signed, which is favourable for the Reich. (During the war, the economic exploitation of the country is steadily deepening, due to the differences between the two countries, there is merely “structural disparity” between them.) Hungary is the first country to join the Tripartitite Agreement in November 1940. Although the so-called third Anti-Jewish Law is only enacted in the summer of 1941, and is partly motivated by considerable pressure from domestic political forces, it is included on the list of wishes that Berlin asks in exchange of the Second Vienna Award.

All these make the cobweb of contradictions in the (foreign) policies of the government and its successors even more complex. They are basically supporters of a restricted parliamentarism, and still – with their steps based on different logics – they weaken it unintentionally; their aim in foreign policy is to maintain the status of “armed neutrality”, but – due to their steps based on different logics – they seriously hurt the interests of London which is at war with the Axis.

All these were done – as mentioned above – with the dignity of western vassals. The mentality of the Hungarian political elite of the era did not even contemplate about the enormous superiority of Germany. At the meeting in Kiel in August 1938 (which forced Hitler to sign the Munich Agreement), when the Führer reproached Horthy for negotiating with Ludwig Beck, Chief of Staff of the German armed forces, the Regent replied proudly: he was in the position to choose who he wanted to negotiate with. At the same time, the Hungarians signed a (tentative) agreement with the Little Entente in Bled, and when Joachim Ribbentrop did not understand its purpose, Kálmán Kánya responded that he should not be thinking about it, as he would never apprehend it. And generally, if we read through Andreas Hillgruber’s collection of documents (Staatsmänner und Diplomaten bei Hitler), it can be seen clearly that among those who negotiated with Adolf Hitler, the Hungarians were quite outstanding as far as self-esteem was concerned.

Looking at the political institution system, we can see that it does not change basically until the German occupation, and the restricted parliamentarism developed by István
Bethlen in the early 1920s continues to operate. Although Nazi penetration – especially after 1939 – is really significant, it does not result in a regime change. Until 15 October 1944, Hitler is in favour of maintaining the traditional political system, because this can offer (in spite of all the contradictions) the best performance possible for the war efforts.

No political parties are banned, and the parliament works regularly until 4 May 1943, when Miklós Kállay makes the regent adjourn the parliamentary session, but his aim is that the extreme rightist, fascist Arrow Cross parties would not be able to drive him into an impossible situation vis-à-vis Berlin.

The operation of trade unions and non-governmental organisations are not restricted, and the colourfulness of the press is limited only to the extent which is natural at wartime. The profound change takes place after March 1944 in this field, too.

Regarding the Jewish question, the Kállay government rejects German demands consistently until the German occupation. Germany starts to exert pressure in October 1942. Kállay’s – in essence, negative – reply is formulated in early December. The situation of the Hungarian Jewry of 800,000 only changes after the German occupation, but then the change is dramatic.

Personnel decisions demonstrate sovereignty until the occupation, and they often aim at maintaining independence from Berlin. In August 1941, László Bárdossy replaces Henrik Werth with Ferenc Szombathelyi as Chief of the General Staff. Werth had a major role in entering the war against the Soviet Union, and (in contrast with his Prime Minister) he wanted to send considerable forces to the front, following the example of the Romanians. The aim of the sacking of Bárdossy and the appointment of Miklós Kállay was to lead the country out of the war with the new Prime Minister. Mussolini found this change so disturbing from Berlin’s point of view that he refused to meet with Kállay until the latter was received by Hitler.

Hitler is not only ready to receive Kállay in early June 1942, but he even refrains himself from monologizing, he asks questions and negotiates. Then, after hearing more and more information about Kállay’s attempts to conclude a separate peace, he demands Horthy to dismiss the Prime Minister in April 1943. The Regent refuses to do so, and the only German retaliation is that Jagow, German minister in Budapest is instructed to avoid meeting with him.

In the light of British diplomatic documents we have known it for thirty years that, in contrast with the previous concept, Kállay did not have “withdrawal attempts”, only “peace-feeler” attempts. Although these were more than enough to provoke the wrath of Berlin, they met with total indifference (instead of the anticipated favourable response) in London until March 1943: “Hungary would get neither sympathy nor consideration from us while she remained with the Axis”.

Foreign Secretary Sir Anthony Eden, who cannot be accused of sympathy towards Hungary, acknowledges on 10 March 1943 that “Hungary has managed to maintain her independence more than any of all satellite states in South-Eastern Europe”.

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Consequently, he is ready to depart from the rigid point of view mentioned above. Although they are not willing to barter with a regime “which allied with the Axis, and attacked the UK’s Czechoslovak, Yugoslav and Soviet allies without any challenge”, but – and this is a move towards a really major change – “we do not intend … to truncate Hungary, and do not want to punish the whole Hungarian people for the inanity of its government.” 8 Leaving aside the fact that this new policy contains a serious contradiction, as the “inanity” which it mentions had an important role in the territorial changes, and the new policy included the acceptance of these. It suffices to note here that Washington responded in an ambivalent way, while the Soviet Union, which suffered from the consequences of the Hungarian attack, was openly dismissive.

In 1940, Moscow was still ready to cooperate with Budapest against Romania, and on the days following the German attack of 1941 – in the hope of Hungarian neutrality – it seemed ready to accept the Hungarian standpoint in the question of Transylvania. In early June 1943, however, Molotov says: “The Soviet Government believes that the armed assistance that Hungary has given to Germany and the murders and violent actions, lootings and atrocities they have committed on the occupied territories, responsibility should be borne not only by the Hungarian government, but also, to a larger or smaller extent, the Hungarian people.”9

In spite of these circumstances, Hungary and the anti-Nazi great powers agreed in an (oral) tentative armistice agreement, which was never implemented. One reason for it was that the winners-to-be basically did not change their basic position of demanding unconditional surrender, and regarding territorial questions they accepted a common standpoint which was later included in the armistice agreement signed in Moscow in January 1945, i.e. Hungary had to withdraw behind its frontiers existing on 31 December 1937.

In contrast with all this, Miklós Kállay maintained his objective that his country – as worded precisely by a summary prepared for the British cabinet – should possibly maintain “her economic resources, social structure, political system and territorial gains”.10

The unresolvable contradictions were deepened by Miklós Horthy’s bad decision when he did not resign in March 1944. This was not only a huge favour to Hitler, as the occupation could be implemented with a minimum of forces. It had more serious consequences: the Hungarian administration served the German war aims with even more efficiently than earlier, and the majority of the Jews was deported within some weeks – again, with the help of the Hungarian state machinery. As a consequence of all these, the anti-Nazi great powers regarded Hungary as a satellite, and not as an occupied country. Thus, the Ministers’ Committee, which consisted of Hungarian diplomats who turned against the Sztójay government had no chance to be recognised as a government-in-exile.
Miklós Kállay feared that the coat of arms on the crypt of the Hungarian State will have to be turned inside. Miklós Horthy, preparing for his first meeting with Hitler in 1936, wrote the following: “Ein verlonerer Krieg würde Ungarn von der Landkarte verschwinden machen.”

After World War II, Hungary started its second age of Trianon (which lasted until May 2004).
Nevertheless, the nightmares of its then-leaders did not realise.

Notes

4 Ibid. p. 47.
6 Juhász: op. cit.
7 FO 371 34495/C 485. “Eden’s despatch to the British ambassador in Ankara, 15 January 1943”. This formula is repeated in a number of other documents. Quoted by Juhász: op. cit. Document 5.
9 FO 371 34449/C/7263 “Molotov to the British ambassador in Moscow, 7 June 1943”. Quoted by Juhász: op. cit. Document 32/a.

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