

## A SHORT GUIDE TO THE HISTORY OF HUNGARY IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

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These prefatory remarks are designed to help the reader with the biographical sketches which follow. They contain some information about the history of Hungary in the twentieth century.

For centuries, since the middle of the sixteenth century, the Kingdom of Hungary was part of the Habsburg Empire. In 1900 Hungary, or more precisely the Lands of the Holy Hungarian Crown, were part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Since the compromise of 1867 with Austria, Hungary was an independent kingdom united with Austria by the fact that the emperor of Austria was also the king of Hungary (thus Francis-Joseph, Emperor of Austria since 1848, became King of Hungary (1867–1916), followed by Charles IV). Each country had its own parliament and delegated a commission to discuss the common problems with a similar commission of the other country. However, the defense, finances and foreign affairs were common. Hungary covered the whole interior of the Carpathian basin and had a surface of 325,000 km<sup>2</sup> (125,500 square miles). This included Croatia: the kings of Hungary were also the kings of Croatia since 1102, with some interruptions, but Croatia had an autonomous status with an own assembly. Ethnic Hungarians (i.e., the people whose mother tongue was Hungarian) were a minority of about 48% in the country. The other nationalities, besides the Croats in the southwest, were Serbs in the south (and also further north along the Danube), Romanians in Transylvania in the east, Slovaks in the northwest (but also in many other parts of the country), Ruthenians (also called Carpatho-Ukrainians) in the northeast, and Germans scattered in many parts of the country.

As World War I was ending, in October 1918 a revolution with a democratic liberal program broke out in Hungary. The country became an independent republic, separate from Austria, with count Mihály Károlyi as

President. At the same time Croatia and the Slovaks declared their independence from Hungary, and Romanian troops invaded the eastern part of the country. The Károlyi regime was replaced on March 21, 1919 by the Communist Hungarian Republic of Councils (Magyar Tanácsköztársaság), to which we will refer in the text by its better known names: “Hungarian Soviet Republic” or the “Commune”. In the highly contagious climate of revolutionary euphoria, a surprising number of academics, intellectuals and artists lent their talents to the new administration’s Utopian projects in education and the arts at the beginning of the communist rule; only to lose their enthusiasm after two or three months. E.g., László Dienes, brother of a mathematician mentioned in the text, was one of the commissars of Budapest. There were some atrocities committed; later the period was often referred to as “red terror”, the number of victims is estimated to be about three hundred.

The Soviet regime was overthrown at the end of July when the Romanians invaded most of the country: the era of counterrevolution started. In November Admiral Miklós Horthy entered Budapest as the head of the “National Army”. On March 1, 1920 Hungary was declared to be a kingdom, independent of Austria, but without a king: Horthy was appointed Regent. The peace treaty for Hungary was signed in Versailles on June 4, 1920. In Hungary it is referred to as the Trianon treaty (the act of signing took place in the Great Trianon Palace). Hungary lost over two thirds of its territory to the newly created countries of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia (then called Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes), to Romania, and a sliver to Austria: it became a small country with an area of 93,000 km<sup>2</sup> (36,000 square miles). Together with these territories, one third of ethnic Hungarians remained outside the borders of Hungary.

The counterrevolutionary period started with a “white terror” with considerably more victims than the “red terror”. Some city councils were executed, and many innocent Jews were killed. A “*numerus clausus*” law introduced in 1920 restricted the admission of nationalities to the universities according to their proportion in the population but its purpose was in fact to limit the admission of Jews, who for the first time in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were considered an ethnicity and a religion. At that time, only people of Jewish religion were considered Jews, those who converted were not. There was a tacit antisemitic arrangement, according to which Jews were excluded from state employment; those already employed, with the very few exceptions of world-class professors, were sent into retirement or simply fired.

The next decade saw a gradual normalization of the country under the leadership of the conservative Prime Minister István Bethlen. First the murders stopped, then life slowly went back to almost normal. The “*numerus clausus*” law was modified: equal opportunity for Jews to enter university was restored. However, the great depression, the rise of Italian and German dictatorships, the fear of bolshevism, and the irresistible desire of territorial revision led the country to a fatal course leading to the losing side of a second world war, the repressive Jewish Laws of the late thirties, and the holocaust. First, seemingly, there were some successes.

After Czechoslovakia was dismembered, on November 2, 1938 the “first decision of Vienna” returned to Hungary the southern part of Slovakia inhabited mainly by Hungarians (12,000 km<sup>2</sup> = 4600 square miles). Then on March 15, 1939 Ruthenia (Carpatho-Ukraine) was incorporated into Hungary (another 12,000 km<sup>2</sup>). On August 30, 1940, according to the “second decision of Vienna”, the northern half of Transylvania (45,000 km<sup>2</sup> = 17,400 square miles) returned to Hungary. A large portion of this land was purely Hungarian, inhabited by the so-called “*Secklers*” (*Székelyek*). The decision was sponsored by Italy and curiously it was seconded by Germany, which had Romania as an even closer ally than Hungary. Finally on April 11–14, 1941 the Hungarians occupied the part of Yugoslavia called Vojvodina, which also had a large Hungarian population. However, by the end of the war all this was lost again.

Hungary declared war on the Soviet Union on June 27, 1941. (Later, in December 1941, Hungary declared war on the United States as well, under the initiative of then Prime Minister Bárdossy. The dubious glory of this act unique for a country of this size is only diminished by the fact that President Roosevelt did not take it seriously, and later in 1942 the US declared war on Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria at the same time.) A Hungarian army was mobilized and sent to the eastern front, and got almost annihilated in January 1943. Citizens who were not trusted to serve in the military, mainly Jews and Romanians, were drafted for labor service. Some were sent to the front, some worked in Hungary or in the occupied Yugoslav territory. Their treatment depended on the commanding officers. After the debacle of 1943, Hungary stopped sending soldiers to the front, and the government of Prime Minister Miklós Kállay started secret negotiations with the western allies concerning an armistice. The Germans got to know this, and in March 1944 summoned Horthy to Germany, required full participation of Hungary in the war, and occupied the country. Paradoxically, before the German occupation Hungary was an island of peace and safety in Europe, giving

refuge, e.g., to many Poles or fugitive French prisoners of war. This abruptly ended. Again troops were sent to the east and the Germans managed to deport an estimated number of 440 thousand Jews of the provinces to concentration camps in Poland (Auschwitz) and Germany. (Those in the labor service were saved from deportation.) In July Admiral Horthy summoned a faithful motorized regiment to surround Budapest and to impede the deportation of the 200,000 Jews of Budapest. In spite of this belated effort, about two thirds of the Hungarian Jews were killed.

Horthy also sent secret negotiators to Moscow and an armistice was declared on October 15. Unfortunately most of the country was still in the hands of the Germans, who arrested Horthy and installed a Nazi (“arrow-cross”) government of Hungary with Ferenc Szálasi as “nation leader”. The Jews of Budapest started to be deported (several neutral embassies in Budapest issued passports for large numbers of Jews in Budapest, thus saving some of them from deportation; the Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg, in 1945 deported by the Soviet army, is the best-known person leading such actions), a number were shot on the shore of the Danube, and the remainder transferred into a ghetto around the largest Budapest Synagogue. The arrow-cross had the plan to set fire to the ghetto and burn the Jews alive, but they were stopped from doing this by the German SS.

After a terrible siege of Budapest (when all the bridges over the Danube were blown up) and battles in the western part of the country (Transdanubia), the Soviet occupation (“liberation”) of the country was completed on April 4, 1945. In the new peace treaty the territories regained in 1938–1941 were returned to the respective countries. Actually Czechoslovakia got a little more, but Ruthenia became part of Ukraine, then a republic of the Soviet Union. The Hungarian government tried to convince Stalin to leave Northern Transylvania in Hungarian possession, but Stalin answered that Romania had concluded an armistice before Hungary (namely on August 23, 1944, one day after the Soviet army had broken through the Romanian front).

For some time there was a restricted democracy in Hungary. The first elections were clean and fair for the parties admitted, with the Smallholders’ Party winning absolute majority in the Parliament. Still the Communist Party was in a very strong position due to the presence of the Soviet army, and in 1947 the first signs were showing what was to come: several people (among them the son-in-law of President Zoltán Tildy) were executed on trumped-up charges or arrested and deported by the Soviet army (e.g., Béla Kovács, general secretary of the Smallholders’ Party, who was among them,

was imprisoned in the Soviet Union till 1955); the elections were cheated in order to get the Communists as the strongest party. The Social Democratic Party joined the Hungarian Communist Party to form the Hungarian Workers' Party (Magyar Dolgozók Pártja = MDP), and from 1948 this was the only party in the country. Hungary was declared to be a People's Republic, industry was socialized, and a large part of the agriculture reorganized by force into farmers' cooperatives. The reign of terror started in 1949. Many who belonged to the former bourgeois class were deported to small villages with just one suitcase, their apartments and belongings allotted to party members. When Marshall Tito of Yugoslavia quarrelled with Stalin, by some strange quirk of Marxist logic the authorities punished the "chained dog of the imperialists" by hanging several devoted Hungarian communists on preposterous charges. Thus László Rajk, a fighter in the Spanish civil war and minister of the interior who had organized the dreaded political police ("section for the protection of the state"), was accused, among others, of spying for the Gestapo. Many were sent into internment camps and concentration camps, of which the most infamous was in Recsk, in the wine-growing region around Eger (see: *"My Happy Days in Hell"* by the Hungarian poet György (George) Faludi, Andre Deutsch, London, 1962). Again, a kind of "numerus clausus" was introduced, this time not only at universities but also at secondary schools: children from the former upper-class families or families with a declared religious conviction were generally not admitted, and the number of students not from worker or peasant families became restricted.

In July 1956 the effective ruler of the country, Mátyás Rákosi was relieved of his duty as First Secretary of the MDP, and in October the Hungarian Revolution broke out (see: *"Ten days that shook the Kremlin"* by Tibor Méray, and *"The revolt of the mind"* by Tamás Aczél and Tibor Méray, Frederick A. Prager, New York, 1959). It seemed to be successful, but after 10 days, upon orders of the Presidium of the Soviet Communist Party, Soviet troops crushed the revolution, and its leaders (such as Imre Nagy, Pál Maléter) were executed a year and a half later. The MDP reformed itself under the name Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt = MSZMP). The new regime of János Kádár became one of the longest (32 years) in the Hungarian history. The writer of this introduction did not live in the country during these years. After the retaliations it soon became clear that the regime was considerably milder than the preceding one. Thus in 1950–1956 travel to the west was restricted to the highest ranking party members, and while at the 1954 Amsterdam In-

ternational Congress only two mathematicians from Hungary were present (Alexits and Rényi), at the 1958 Edinburgh Congress their number was 27. Beginning with the sixties, exit visas to leave the country for scientific or even touristic purposes were more and more easy to get, although they were by no means automatic. The relative freedom made it possible to sense the growing consensus in the country that “Existing Socialism does not work, and Working Socialism does not exist.”

This led to the fact that, probably for the first time in history, in 1989–90 a ruling Communist party, the MSZMP handed over the power voluntarily to an emerging opposition.

Thereupon Hungary became a republic, there were clean elections, and the country has switched to a more or less successful market economy.

For further reading on the topic, see

- Ignác Romsics: *Hungary in the 20th Century*, Corvina, Budapest, 1999.
- Margaret Macmillan: *Paris 1919*, Random House, New York, 2002.