

The British Role in Assigning Csallóköz (Žitný Ostrov, Grosse Schütt) to Czechoslovakia*

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Where the River Danube leaves Austria and enters the so-called ‘Little Plain’ at Bratislava/Pozsony/Pressburg (the city where the kings of Hungary were crowned between 1563 and 1830), there is a large island called Csallóköz (Grosse Schütt in German; Velký Žitný Ostrov in Slovak) which lies between the main branch of the Old Danube and the Little Danube, formerly called the Csalló River. The island has remarkably fertile and frequently flooded soil, which is why it was also known as *Aranykert*, the Golden Garden. Its population has been Hungarian since the Settlement (or Conquest) of Hungary in the tenth century, when the clan *Csurla* settled in what used to be called in the Middle Ages the *terra Chalov*. Protected by the waters and the marshes, most of the villages here survived the wars fought against the invading Ottoman Turks.¹ The census of 1910 found living here 121,500 Hungarians, 3000 Germans, and 500 Slovaks, dwelling in altogether 140 settlements. The Peace Treaty of Trianon, in contradiction to the principle of self-determination, assigned the area to the newly created Czechoslovakia. The Vienna Award of 1938 returned it to Hungary, only for it to be ceded back by the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty, together with three more Hungarian villages on the right bank of the river. Between 1945 and 1948 a considerable portion of the Hungarians were expelled and Slovak settlers moved in, mainly into the towns of Dunajská Streda/Dunaszerdahely, Samorin/Somorja, Velký Meder/Nagymegyér and Kolárovo/Gúta. The cession of Dunacsún in the 1947 peace treaty enabled Czechoslovakia in 1992 to divert the Danube into a 40 km-long concrete canal ending in the hydroelectric power plant at Gabčíkovo/Bős. Construction of the canal took place in disregard of the protests of Hungary and of the population of the island, and diverted most of the water from the main branch of the river, thus leaving the area dangerously dry. This unilateral act led to a lasting dispute between the two countries. In order to resolve the matter peacefully, the parties turned in 1993, at Hungary’s initiative, to the International Court of Justice at The Hague. After long and costly deliberations, a verdict was eventually reached in 1997. Instead of ending the dispute, the decision actually extended it without any mutually acceptable settlement in view.²

The issue of Gabčíkovo/Bős added to tensions already existing between the two countries on account of the treatment of the 600,000-strong Hungarian community of Slovakia. The construction of the canal and the ‘damned dam’ additionally led to a further influx of Slovaks into the Csallóköz region, and inevitably to increased tension between Slovaks and the Hungarians. The recent

redrawing of the administrative regions of Slovakia cut, moreover, the island into two, eliminating the last district in Slovakia which had an absolute majority of Hungarians. The above overview, with all its contemporary resonances, adds additional significance to the question of how and why Csallóköz was assigned to Czechoslovakia in the first place.

1. *The fait accompli*

On the verge of economic, military and psychological collapse, on 4 October 1918, Austria-Hungary asked for an armistice, based on President Wilson's Fourteen Points. Neither those, nor the peace terms set forth by the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, on 5 January 1918, envisaged the dismemberment of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Both programmes called for 'autonomous development' or self-government for its many peoples. But, by 18 October, when the U.S. Secretary of State, Robert Lansing, responded to Austria-Hungary's request, the allies had already recognized Czechoslovakia as a would-be state (Britain did so on 9 August 1918), and his note accordingly insisted on the recognition of the independence of Czechoslovakia and also of a Southern Slav State. These were conceded in a note sent by Gyula Andrassy, Jr, joint-foreign minister of Austria-Hungary in its last few remaining days. On 30 October, a gathering of Slovak politicians at Turócszentmárton/Turčianský Svätý Martin decided to join the Czechs in a common state, but at Kassa (later Košice) Slovaks not eager to join the new Czechoslovakia proclaimed on 11 December an independent Eastern Slovak Republic.³ The armistice between Austria-Hungary and the Allies signed on 3 November at Padua did not refer to the issue of the borders, but allowed free movement for the troops of the victorious allies on the territory of the by then defunct Monarchy. Count Károlyi, the new Hungarian Prime Minister appointed by King Charles, tried to consolidate his position through a military convention signed with General Franchet d'Esperey on 13 November at Belgrade. This drew a demarcation line, allowing the military occupation of the southern and eastern regions of Hungary, but made no mention of the north or of the claims put forward by the Czechs.

There is an English adage that 'possession is nine tenths of the law', and Hungary's neighbours acted accordingly. Romania re-entered the war on 5 November (two days after the armistice was signed) and its troops invaded Transylvania even before the Belgrade Convention. On 8 November, Czech troops tried to take the northern areas of Hungary, only to be repelled in the face of the modest Hungarian forces dispatched. Eduard Beneš, who was by now the most influential Czech spokesman in Paris, sent a note to the French government on 3 November, claiming the territories north of the Pozsony-Komárom-Esztergom-Vác-Rimaszombat-Kassa-Csap-Máramarossziget line.⁴ This wide swathe included the Csallóköz, and accorded with territories already

identified in the various plans and maps put forward by Masaryk and Beneš in their earlier propaganda exercises conducted in France, Britain, Russia and, finally, the United States.⁵ Disappointed with the military convention and fearing that Hungary might win over too many Slovaks with its proposal for autonomy,⁶ Beneš turned to Pichon, the French foreign minister, and succeeded in convincing him that the Belgrade Convention must be overruled and that the newly-constituted Czechoslovak state and its army be authorized to occupy the territories it claimed from Hungary. Lieutenant-Colonel Vix, the representative of the Allies in Budapest, passed on this information to Károlyi on 3 December.⁷ Uncertain about the intention of the victorious Great Powers, and aware of the weakness of the armed forces of the new state, Milan Hodža, formerly a Slovak member of the Hungarian Parliament, and now representative of the new Czechoslovakia in Budapest, wanted to guarantee the peaceful transfer of the administration of Northern Hungary to Slovak hands. He accordingly concluded an agreement with the Hungarian government (not incidentally with the Minister of Defense, Albert Bartha) on 6 December on a line which reflected the actual ethnic border between the Slovaks and the Hungarians. It ran north of the Pozsony (Pressburg, Prežpurok in Slovak – the neologism ‘Bratislava’ was only just being introduced, competing for a time in late 1918 with ‘Wilsonovo mesto’) - Bazin - Érsekújvár - Losonc - Kassa - Töketerebes line. The Hungarian government recognized an autonomous Slovak administration north of the line, in the predominantly Slovak-inhabited regions.⁸ The Csallóköz was naturally left with Hungary.

Beneš and the Prague government were aghast. What they wanted was not the territorial separation of the Slovaks from the Hungarians and the creation of a genuinely national state composed of Czechs and Slovaks. Instead they sought to acquire a ‘corridor’ through Hungarian territory to Yugoslavia, with the Danube acting as the border as far south as Vác, along with the Börzsöny, Mátra and Bükk Mountains, including Subcarpathia, up to Máramarossziget. In the following days the newly-formed Czechoslovak Army occupied the territory assigned to it in the Bartha- Hodža agreement, but they were determined to push further. Beneš, using strategic arguments with Marshal Foch, the Supreme Commander of the Allied forces, and political ones with the Quai d’Orsay, managed to get a line half-way between the Czech demands and the Bartha-Hodža line, which was sent by Prime Minister Clemenceau to Franchet d’Esperey on 19 December: ‘The southern border of Czechoslovakia is the Danube, then the River Ipoly up to the town of Rimaszombat, from there straight eastward to the River Ung, and it follows the latter until it reaches the old border.’ The unsuspecting Vix first learned about the new line from Hodža on December 22, and on the following day he received instructions to convey it to Károlyi.⁹ The Hungarian government, weakened by internal strife between the radical left and the disillusioned right, protested but acquiesced, and ordered

the evacuation of the territory demanded. Isolated resistance occurred, but Budapest categorically banned any armed action, so the rising planned in the Csallóköz was abandoned and, by 20 January, the territories north of the new demarcation line were evacuated.¹⁰

2. Plans for the borders of Hungary

For centuries England had been a supporter and often an ally of the Habsburg Monarchy. Its policy had been dictated by the assumption that the balance of power demanded the existence of a Great Power in Central Europe. That attitude explains why it was that in 1848-49 the British government did not support the cause of Hungary's independence, despite its enthusiastic endorsement by the overwhelming majority of the public. The Settlement (*Ausgleich*) reached between Hungary and the Habsburgs in 1867 was warmly welcomed as a guarantee of the continued existence and increased strength of the Monarchy. Later on, both friendly and unfriendly policies towards Germany involved Austria-Hungary in the calculations. That is why the British public took a strong interest in the affairs of Austria-Hungary, as demonstrated by the large number of books and newspaper articles covering various aspects of the Monarchy.¹¹ Despite the many changes in the international scene and the sympathies and antipathies felt by individual Britons toward the Habsburgs and their peoples, the preservation and strength of the Habsburg Monarchy remained one of the cornerstones of British foreign policy and public thinking right up until the British declaration of war on Austria-Hungary on 12 August 1914.

During the Great War all the imaginary and real shortcomings of Austria and Hungary were highlighted in the British press, but Hungary's blackened reputation was not the cause of the *volte-face* of British foreign policy. This only made the change of policy easier and later served as justification for the unfair borders drawn by the peace conference in 1919. Nevertheless, it took great efforts by the British friends of the Czech and Croat politicians who went into exile in the hope of making the independence of their respective nations one of the war aims of the Allies (primarily Wickham Steed of *The Times* and the political writer R.W. Seton-Watson), to convince their government of the need to accept the idea of breaking up the Monarchy into national units. From August 1914, Seton-Watson was working with the utmost exertion, not sparing his health and wealth, for the destruction of Austria-Hungary and for the creation of a 'New Europe'. He did so in the belief that it would lead to the faster defeat of Germany and that it would, at the same time, ensure a better future for all the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe. His articles in the press, particularly in the weekly journal *The New Europe* started in October 1916, together with the appointment of Steed and Seton-Watson as co-directors of the Austro-Hungarian section of the Department of Propaganda in Enemy Countries under Lord Northcliffe (incidentally the brother of Lord Rothermere,

who later became a strong advocate of revising the borders of Hungary) provided intellectual ammunition for the decision-makers to abandon not only the territorial integrity but even the very existence of Austria-Hungary.¹² Such a course was not adopted until the spring of 1918, and then only as a last, desperate measure to foment dissent and rebellion inside the Monarchy. The aim behind all this was to prevent Germany from winning the war with the troops freshly released from the Eastern war theatre after the Peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.¹³

The British Government recognized the Czechoslovak National Council 'as the supreme organ of the Czechoslovak movement in Allied countries', and its military force 'as an organized unit operating in the Allied cause' (27 May 1918). This was succeeded by the Supreme War Council's expression of 'earnest sympathy for the nationalistic aspirations towards freedom of the Czechoslovak and Yugoslav peoples' (3 June). Finally, on 9 August, 1918, the British Government officially accepted 'the Czechoslovak National Council as the supreme organ of the Czechoslovak national interests and as the present trustee of the future Czechoslovak Government.'

Even before the proposals and plans of Seton-Watson's 'New Europe' group were turned into reality by the armies of the victors and by the peace conference, Leo Amery, a trusted adviser to the prime minister, made an appeal to Balfour, the foreign secretary, had opposed the creation of what he thought would be unviable, weak states. In his opinion, the Austro-Hungarian problem could not be settled 'on the principle of simply using our victory to satisfy the ambitions of our friends', since it 'will inevitably create a state of unrest and instability which will sooner or later lead up to another war.' Amery had a proposal of a different kind. In a memorandum drawn up on 20 October, he wrote, 'Permanent stability and prosperity could best be secured by a new Danubian Confederation comprising German Austria, Bohemia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Rumania and probably also Bulgaria... To attempt to create artificial sovereignties, especially on the basis of "spoils to the victor", is only to create a new and more troubled Balkan Peninsula. The wisest course is to aim at securing the fairest and most workable rearrangement on national lines, but at the same time actively to encourage the idea of a new union, preferably one which would include the whole of the present Austro-Hungarian Empire (excepting Galicia and Bukovina), and Rumania, Serbia and Bulgaria as well. In such a union the different nationalities would find the solution of their nationalist rivalries and an ample field for prosperous development... In any case the various nationalities of Central Europe are so interlocked, and their racial frontiers are so unsuitable as the frontiers of really independent sovereign states, that the only satisfactory and permanent working policy for them lies in their incorporation in a non-national superstate. We can delay, but we cannot prevent the eventual coming of that superstate... A League of Nations based on

the principle of nationalism might soon find itself as much of an anomaly and an obstacle to progress as the Holy Alliance in its day... For the purposes of the war we have rightly backed up Czecho-Slovaks, Yugoslavs and every anti-German and anti-Austrian movement we could find. But for the purposes of a lasting settlement we must regulate the satisfaction of these national aspirations by the need of creating, or recreating, a larger super-national unity in Central and South-Eastern Europe.’¹⁴

The paper raised considerable interest in the Foreign Office, but the ‘experts’ succeeded in neutralizing Amery’s effect. Harold Nicolson thought it was useless for the British to make confederation plans for other peoples. He raised, however, two important issues: whether Britain ought to play the role of an impartial judge between friends and foes, and whether the new frontiers should be based on traditional strategic and economic considerations or whether, in the new Europe of the League of Nations, such things would become superfluous and outdated. Namier brushed the worries of Amery aside by stating that the number of states would not change, and that only Serbia and Romania would receive ‘more sensible’ borders. Namier’s minute pacified Cecil, now the Assistant Secretary of State and the highest official to see the memorandum, who had at first shown ‘considerable sympathy to Amery’s views.’¹⁵ The opinion of the American Commission to Negotiate Peace was not much different. By the end of the war it had accepted the division of Central Europe into national states, but in its final report on Austria-Hungary Charles Seymour expressed serious reservations: ‘The Commission is forced to the conclusion that the frontiers proposed are unsatisfactory as the international boundaries of sovereign states. It has been found impossible to discover such lines, which would be at the same time just and practical. An example of the injustice that would result may be instanced in the fact that a third of the area and population of the Czecho-Slovak state would be alien to that nationality. Another lies in placing a quarter of the Magyars under foreign domination. But any attempt to make the frontier conform more closely to the national line destroys their practicability as international boundaries. Obviously many of these difficulties would disappear if the boundaries were to be drawn with the purpose of separating not independent nations, but component portions of a federalized state. A reconsideration of the data from this aspect is desirable.’¹⁶

In the last days of October the Habsburg Monarchy collapsed, its peoples becoming hostile neighbours and rivals. The armistice was thus signed with an already non-existing legal entity, and when Beneš protested against this, the British Foreign Office apologized and, after 4 November, the Czech leader was invited to the meetings of the heads of the Allied governments.¹⁷ Seton-Watson’s two memoranda composed in late November, which were included in the official documentation of the British Peace Delegation, pointed out that henceforward the Allies were obliged to deal with six successor governments,

and the only question left was the delimitation of the new frontiers.¹⁸ The memorandum on ‘The Future Frontiers of Hungary’ declared that, ‘it will be necessary to constitute boundary commissions, consisting of representatives of the two countries directly concerned and delegates appointed by the Peace Conference or by the League of Nations if already constituted. With a view to allaying inter-racial friction in the meantime, it may be helpful to establish certain grey zones... which should be administered under international control until the Boundary Commission should have completed their enquiries.’ The large island of the Csallóköz was listed as a grey zone, despite the fact that its population was almost entirely Hungarian.

Like the American president, the British prime minister, David Lloyd George, committed himself to a fair and just peace. On 12 November, the day after the armistice with Germany was signed, he addressed representatives of his Liberal Party: ‘No settlement which contravenes the principles of eternal justice will be a permanent one. Let us be warned by the example of 1871. We must not allow any sense of revenge, any spirit of greed, any grasping desire, to over-ride the fundamental principles of righteousness. Vigorous attempts will be made to hector and bully the Government in the endeavour to make them depart from the strict principles of right and to satisfy some base, sordid, squalid ideas of vengeance and of avarice.’¹⁹

The official British proposal on the new borders of Hungary had been drawn up by 8 February. From Pozsony to Komárom, it followed the northern branch of the Danube (Kis-Duna), accordingly leaving the Csallóköz with Hungary. Czechoslovakia’s access to the Danube was envisaged by assigning the (also purely Hungarian) territory between Komárom and the confluence of the River Ipoly.²⁰

3. The Peace Conference

The conference that started its deliberations on 18 January in Paris was in fact only the ‘preliminary peace conference’, a gathering of the victors aimed at reaching a common platform *vis-à-vis* the vanquished. The claims of Czechoslovakia were presented on 5 February to the Council of Ten (the heads of government and the foreign ministers of the five Great Powers: the British Empire, France, Italy, Japan and the United States) by E. Beneš, now foreign minister. Having presented a rather distorted history of ‘the Czechoslovak nation’, he claimed the western strip of Hungary in order to have a territorial link with Yugoslavia, the Danube as a ‘natural border’ down to the town of Vác, and from there a line to Miskolc (including the town) embracing most of the Tokaj wine growing region. He announced that the Ruthenians (Rusyns) yearned to escape Hungarian jurisdiction and had asked for autonomy in Czechoslovakia, and, although that would place a burden on the new republic, Czechoslovakia was ‘willing to assume such a burden’.²¹ Lloyd George asked

about the ethnic composition of the territories claimed, and specifically about the Csallóköz.²² Although Beneš used totally false ethnic data in his presentation (including the absurd figure that 450,000 Slovaks were to remain in rump-Hungary), he admitted that the claim to the Csallóköz was based on economic arguments as Czechoslovakia needed agricultural areas so as to be self-sufficient in food production. He also asserted that the rural population north of the Danube was ‘Slovak in its deepest layer’.²³

Consideration of the Czechoslovak claims was assigned to a sub-committee composed of the representatives of the Great Powers. It was headed by the French Jules Cambon, and the Italian S. Raggi as vice-chairman, Harold Nicolson was the British representative, joined by the Australian minister for the navy, Sir John Cook. The U.S. nominated Allen Dulles and Charles Seymour. Nicolson was filled with enthusiasm for the emerging ‘New Europe’. He wrote that, ‘It was the thought of the new Serbia, the new Greece, the new Bohemia, the new Poland which made our hearts sing hymns at heaven’s gate.’ He gave credit to Seton-Watson and his weekly, *The New Europe*, for this feeling: ‘Bias there was, and prejudice. But they proceeded, not from any revengeful desire to subjugate and penalise our late enemies, but from a fervent aspiration to create and fortify the new nations whom we regarded, with maternal instinct, as the justification of our sufferings and of our victory.’²⁴ Having revealed his sympathy mixed with distrust towards Germany and Austria, Nicolson went on, ‘My feelings toward Hungary were less detached. I confess that I regarded, and still regard, that Turanian tribe with acute distaste. Like their cousins the Turks, they had destroyed much and created nothing. Buda Pest was a false city devoid of any autochthonous reality. For centuries the Magyars had oppressed their subject nationalities. The hour of liberation and of retribution was at hand.’²⁵ The other British members of the Territorial Committee (Allen Leeper, J. Headlam Morley) as well as their superior, Eyre Crowe, also showed a strong dislike towards Germany and Hungary.²⁶ Cook admitted that his approach to the issues at stake was that, in case of doubt, he should support the friend against the enemy. As we have seen, however, the attitude of the foremost American expert, Charles Seymour, was different. In fact Seton-Watson, the idealist advocate of justice, also tried to be more fair than the officials, but his criticism of the excessive demands of the Serbs and Romanians did not apply to the Czechs.²⁷ He was not a member of the British delegations, but at the end of December he moved to Paris, where he shared an apartment with Steed close to the Arc de Triomphe and to the hotels where the British Peace Delegations were staying.²⁸ His influence, however, was more on the principles than on the details. He thought that, ‘The main interest of the Czecho-Slovaks, as of every State under the new dispensation, is to be saddled with as few, not as many, alien subjects as possible; and it will be an unmixed blessing for Prague if it can find safe devices for paring down certain sections of

the frontier and so reducing the number of German and Magyar subjects.²⁹ He, as usual, proved naïve in his assessment of his Central European friends.

The Czechoslovak Committee deliberated between 27 February and 14 March. At the meeting of 28 February it appeared that it was only the French who wanted the Csallóköz to be given to Czechoslovakia. A sub-committee was assigned to work out the details of the Slovak-Hungarian border. Despite his strong anti-Hungarian sentiments, Nicolson's diary shows that he tried to be fair: 'We begin with Pressburg and reach agreement.' By this he meant that the city, where only one percent of the inhabitants were Slovak, would pass to Czechoslovakia. He went on, 'Then we get to the Grosse Schütt. French wants to give it to the Czechs. The U.S. want to give it to the Magyars. I reserve judgement, saying it depends on whether German Hungary [the future Burgenland] is given to Austria.' Then he described the wrangling over the rest of the border, where the Americans 'want to go north along the ethnical line, thus cutting all the railways.'³⁰ On 4 March, Beneš was summoned to explain his demands. Nicolson was not impressed and wrote, 'Never have I known so voluble a man.'³¹ In the following days, the debate continued about Sátoraljaújhely and the Csallóköz. The higher-ranking British officials turned their position around on the latter. Nicolson wrote in his diary for 7 March, 'Crowe and Sir Joseph Cook insist upon giving the Grosse Schütt to the Czechs. I cannot persuade them out of it. I am *sure* [Nicolson's italics] they are wrong and it is heart-breaking to have to support a claim with which I disagree. I am anxious about the future political complexion of the Czech State if they have to digest solid enemy electorates, plus an Irish Party in Slovakia, plus a Red party in Ruthenia, to say nothing of their own extreme socialists. However, as I am tied one end by the Grosse Schütt and the other end by Satoralja [sic], the only concessions I can make are on the Satoralja-Komarom sector. In the afternoon meeting at the Quai d'Orsay I and Lerond give way on this sector and accept the American line.'³² On 8 March, the Czechoslovak Committee accepted the proposal of the sub-committee that Csallóköz and the Sátoraljaújhely-Csap railway line should go to Czechoslovakia, but left most the town of Sátoraljaújhely with Hungary. It also turned down the idea of a corridor between Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia.³³ On 14 March all the borders of Czechoslovakia were accepted, subject to confirmation by the Council of Four.³⁴

The full extent of the mutilations Hungary would have to suffer was first realized by the British Prime Minister. In his Fontainebleau Memorandum (25 March), Lloyd George warned that, 'There will never be peace in South-Eastern Europe if every little state now coming into being is to have a large Magyar *irredenta* within its borders. I would therefore take as a guiding principle of the peace that as far as humanly possible, the different races should be allocated to their motherlands, and that this human criterion should have precedence over

considerations of strategy or economic, or transportation consideration, which are usually economics or communications, which can usually be adjusted by other means.³⁵ Unfortunately, the British delegates did not stand by these sensible principles with sufficient vigour. As has been shown, Lloyd George had already held such views well before Bolshevism captured Hungary, but now he reinforced his position with the comment, ‘one Russia is enough.’³⁶

Cambon presented the recommendations of the Czechoslovak Committee to the four foreign ministers on 1 April. He explained the departure from the ethnic principle with the very economic and strategic considerations denounced by Lloyd George. When Lansing, the U.S. Secretary of State objected, Cambon argued that without generous borders it would be difficult to defend the new country. Laroche added that referenda could not be allowed because they would lead to a very narrow and poor state.³⁷

There was still a small chance of a change over the Csallóköz. Under the impact of the shock caused by the proclamation of the Hungarian Soviet Republic on 21 March, the Supreme Council, on the initiative of Lloyd George, sent the South African Boer General, J.C. Smuts, a member of the British War Cabinet, to Budapest, with the task of finding out how best to handle the Bolshevik danger. Béla Kun failed to accept a modified version of a neutral zone between the Romanian and Hungarian troops, so Smuts left Budapest immediately.³⁸ On his way back, he visited Prague on the instructions of Lloyd George and during his conversation with President Masaryk on 7 April he expressed the British concern about Czechoslovakia annexing the large, purely Hungarian territory north of the Danube. According to Smuts, Masaryk was ready to forego the claim provided Czechoslovakia was given a little strip on the right bank of the Danube, facing Pozsony.³⁹ Back in Paris, Smuts emphatically urged the Conference, and on 3 May the Council of the Foreign Ministers specifically, to accept such a deal. Four to five hundred thousand Hungarians in the southern strip of the new state ‘would cause a serious problem’ in the future, he said.⁴⁰ All this was, however, to no avail. Nicolson gave the following account in his diary entry of 3 May, ‘Masaryk had agreed that if they could obtain a bridgehead across the river at Pressburg they would abandon the Grosse Schütt. I begged Hardinge [the Permanent Under-Secretary of the Foreign Office] to bring this offer up before the [Supreme] Council. He did so, in an admirable manner. I had even drafted a specific resolution (I have learnt the value of “resolutions”) to that effect.⁴¹ To my dismay, however, Pichon put up Laroche to say that he had heard from Benes that Smuts had “completely misunderstood” old Masaryk. All the latter had said was that *some* [Nicolson’s italics] people in Czechoslovakia thought this would be a good arrangement, but that the Czech Government thought it would be a very bad arrangement... This, I fear, is untrue. It increases my dislike of Kramarsh [sic], who is behind everything nasty that Benes does. They are in the pocket of the French. The

French will now tell them that they have “d  jou  ” an anti-Czech intrigue on my part. Yet it wasn’t an intrigue. It was an eleventh-hour attempt to right a palpable injustice.’⁴² Nicolson did not mention that at this point Lansing interposed that the ministers should not put pressure on the experts of the Committee. The following day (or on 5 May) the Czech Committee once more argued over the Csall  k  z. Nicolson wrote, ‘Laroche backs up his argument by producing a written note from Benes. We are forced to give way. The Czechs will have their Magyars and their Island. I do not feel this to be a wise decision: but I have done my best. Evidently Masaryk committed a gaffe and has been forced to deny it by his Government.’⁴³

The Foreign Ministers discussed the recommendations on the borders of Czechoslovakia on 8 May. This time Lansing woke up and said that, ‘in every instance the decision was to the detriment of Hungary; some two million Hungarians end up under Rumanian and Czechoslovak sovereignty!’. Pichon and his associates, Tardieu and Laroche, gave strong support to the recommendations of the Committee, while Balfour and Sonnino remained silent.⁴⁴ The British secretary, a former Conservative prime minister, was apparently uninterested in such minor matters, and he was not inclined to fight for the principles enunciated by his Liberal successor, Lloyd George. Accordingly, the Ministers endorsed the borders proposed by the Committee without any change.

The Council of Four gave its own approval on 12 May, without any debate. Thus the fate of the Csall  k  z was already practically settled when, on 6 May, Seton-Watson left Paris for Prague, to see the fruits of his exertions. In letters sent to his wife and to Headlam-Morley, one of the British delegates in Paris responsible mainly for Germany, he said that conditions in the new state, including in Bratislava, were better than he had expected. He had conversations with Masaryk as well as with several other leading Czech and Slovak politicians. In his reports he presented a somewhat rosy picture of how the German and Hungarian minorities had come to terms with the new situation.⁴⁵ On 26 May, in a long letter sent to Headlam-Morley, he expressed a view, based on the false premiss that a large number of the Hungarians assigned to Czechoslovakia were ‘Magyarized’ Slovaks, that soon most of the Hungarians would ‘return’ to their Slovak nationality. While admitting that the population of the Csall  k  z was Hungarian, Seton-Watson swallowed the Slovak propaganda that they, on account of their economic interests, preferred to belong to the new state. He wrote, ‘*Tell Nicolson that in the question of the Schiutt I made up my mind.*’ (My italics).

When finally the Hungarians were allowed to present their case at the Conference in early 1920, Czechoslovakia already held the Csall  k  z and other Hungarian-inhabited areas firmly in its hands. To the consternation of the French and the Czechs, Lloyd George took strong objections to the unfairness of

the proposed treaty with Hungary. At the London meeting of the Heads of Delegations on 3 March 1920, he pointed out that, ‘one-third of the total Magyar population’ would find itself under foreign rule. There will be no peace in Central Europe, ‘if it were discovered afterwards that the claims of Hungary were sound and that a whole community of Magyars had been handed over like cattle to Czecho-Slovakia and to Transylvania [sic], simply because the Conference had refused to examine the Hungarian case.’ Nitti, the new Italian prime minister, agreed with him, while Berthelot, representing Millerand, the new French prime minister, stubbornly opposed any re-examination of the border issue. The British expert, Allen Leeper, took a position contrary to his own prime minister on 8 March. For example, he declared that without the Csallóköz the nearby population, including Bratislava and Komárom, would be condemned to starvation, and in the east the railway lines precluded following the ethnic line. Since in the previous year, Lloyd George too had accepted the Czechoslovak borders, Lord Curzon, the British foreign secretary, did not press the issue further,⁴⁶ and the Csallóköz, together with the rest of one million Hungarians assigned to the new country, remained part of Czechoslovakia, at least until 1938, and again after 1945.

Czechoslovakia, and since 1993 Slovakia, has not proved to be a good host to its Hungarians. It failed to get rid of all of them after the Second World War, but its colonization efforts bore bitter fruits for there is now an ethnically mixed population in the south of Slovakia which is a source of considerable local and international tension. Since any border change is ruled out by the international community, the only hope of improving the lot of the Hungarians of Slovakia and also of the relationship between Slovakia and Hungary (now allies in NATO and fellow-members of the European Union) lies in genuine local self-government, one of the cornerstones of democracy. This will not, however, be accepted by the majority of the Slovaks unless there is strong outside pressure. The powers who drew up a bad peace treaty in 1919-20, which among much else misassigned the Csallóköz, should feel obliged to remedy it by applying such pressure.

* This paper grew out of an older article of mine, ‘A csallóközi magyar-szlovák határ

története’, *História*, 10, 1988, no 6, pp. 28-30.

¹ ‘Csallóköz’, *Magyar Nagylexikon*, vol. 5, Budapest, 1997, pp. 720-21. There is an excellent monograph on the island, *A Csallóköz szívében. Dunaszerdahelyi járás*,

Dunaszerdahely, 2002. An informative local newspaper is available on the web:

<http://www.csallokoz.sk/>

² A compromise solution to the controversial Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros hydroelectric project has been proposed by Béla Lipták. For basic information, see

<http://duna.org/danube/hung/terv.htm>

³ Ignác Romsics, *The Dismantling of Historic Hungary: the Peace Treaty of Trianon, 1920*, New York, 2002. p. 69.

⁴ Mária Ormos, *Padovától Trianonig*, Budapest, 1993. pp. 56-57.

⁵ Dagmar Perman, *The Shaping of the Czechoslovak State*, Leiden, 1962. Cf. Lajos Arday, *Térkép, csata után. Magyarország a brit külpolitikában (1918-1919)*, Budapest 1990, pp. 120-24. It is worth noting that in the first proposal, set forth by Masaryk in October 1914, the north-western border of Hungary was the Little Danube (Kis-Duna), which left the Csallóköz with Hungary. See Arday, *Térkép, csata után*, p. 120.

⁶ The head of the new portfolio, minister for nationalities, Oszkár Jászi, envisaged and subsequently enacted a series of laws which created national autonomy for the Rusyns/Ruthenes, Slovaks and Germans of Hungary. See György Litván, *Jászi Oszkár*, Budapest, 2003. pp. 151-57.

⁷ Arday, *Térkép, csata után*, pp. 78, 103-04; Zsuzsa L. Nagy, 'Peacemaking after World War I: The Western Democracies and the Hungarian Question', in (ed.) Stephen Borsody, *The Hungarians: A Divided Nation*, New Haven, CT, 1988, pp. 35-36; Géza Herczegh, *A szarajevói merénylettől a potsdami konferenciáig. Magyarország a világháborús Európában*, Budapest, 1999, p. 92.

⁸ Gusztáv Gratz, *A forradalmak kora*, Budapest, 1935. pp. 56-57; Tibor Hajdu, *Az 1918-as magyarországi polgári demokratikus forradalom*, Budapest, 1968. p. 159; Ormos, *Padovától*

Trianonig, pp. 106-109; Károly Víg, *A szlovákiai magyarság sorsa*, Budapest, 1992, pp. 2-23. Romsics, *The Dismantling of Historic Hungary*, pp. 67-68.

⁹ Ormos, *Padovától Trianonig*, pp. 109-111.

¹⁰ Hajdu, *Az 1918-as*, p. 160; Romsics, *The Dismantling of Historic Hungary*, p. 69.

¹¹ See my own *Az elveszett presztízs. Magyarország megítélésének megváltozása Nagy-Britanniában (1894-1918)*, Budapest, 1986 (2nd edition, 1994).

¹² Hugh and Christopher Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe: R.W. Seton-Watson and the Last Years of Austria-Hungary*, London, 1981, is the most authoritative account of the campaign.

¹³ The story of this fundamental change can be followed in a number of well-researched books: Z. A. B. Zeman, *The Gentlemen Negotiators: A Diplomatic History of the First World War*, New York 1971; W.H. Rothwell, *British War Aims and Peace Diplomacy 1914-1918*, Oxford, 1971; K.J. Calder, *Britain and the Origins of the New Europe 1914-1918*, Cambridge, 1976; W. Fest, *Peace or Partition: The Habsburg Monarchy and British Policy 1914-1918*, London, 1981; and Lajos Arday, 'Economics Versus Nationality: British plans for Reshaping East-Central Europe in 1917-1919', *Hungarian Studies in English*, 11, pp. 165-172. In my *Elveszett presztízs*, chapter 7 gives a summary of this process, mainly from a Hungarian angle. Cf. Arday, *Térkép, csata után*, chapters 1 and 3.

¹⁴ The National Archive: Public Record Office (hereafter PRO), FO 371/3136/17223. 'The Austro-Hungarian Problem', memorandum by L.S. Amery, 20 October, 1918.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Washington, National Archives, RG 256. Inquiry Doc. 514, Charles Seymour's paper 'Epitome of Reports on Just and Practical Boundaries Within Austria-Hungary for Czechoslovaks, Jugo-Slavs, Rumanians, Poles, Ruthenians, Magyars', undated [around the end of

1918].

¹⁷ H. Hanak, 'The Government, the Foreign Office and Austria-Hungary, 1914-1918', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 47, 1969, p. 197.

¹⁸ H. and C. Seton-Watson, *The Making of the New Europe*, p. 324.

¹⁹ Quoted by Harold Nicolson, *Peacemaking 1919*, London, 1933, p. 21.

²⁰ PRO FO 608/5/1645/490-501.

²¹ Romsics, *The Dismantling of Historic Hungary*, p. 78.

²² *Ibid*, p. 80.

²³ Ormos, *Padovától Trianonig*, p. 156.

²⁴ Nicolson, *Peacemaking 1919*, p. 33.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 34. Such singular antipathy must have been rooted in the period when Nicolson's father was consul-general in Budapest in the 1880s. Arday's explanation that its cause lay in an extramarital affair which his mother had while in Hungary (*Térkép, csata után*, p. 318, n. 60) is plausible and I, too, have heard it from several sources.

²⁶ Arday, *Térkép, csata után*, pp. 140-41; Cf. H. and C. Seton-Watson, *The Making of the New Europe*, p. 340.

²⁷ H. and C. Seton-Watson, pp. 341-42, 349.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 335.

²⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 355-56.

³⁰ Nicolson, *Peacemaking 1919*, p. 275.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 277.

³² *Ibid*, pp. 279-80.

³³ The debates are summarized by Romsics, *The Dismantling of Historic Hungary*, pp. 83-85.

Romsics shows that the French were the most partisan, and the Americans were 'intent on

avoiding any injustice with regard to the Hungarians’, to the dismay of the French. *Ibid*, p. 87.

³⁴ Ormos, *Padovától Trianonig*, pp. 197-200; Arday, *Térkép, csata után*, pp. 158-59.

³⁵ Francis Deák, *Hungary at the Paris Peace Conference*, New York, 1942, p. 52, quoted by Romsics, pp. 94-95.

³⁶ Herczegh, *A szarajevói merénylettől a potsdami konferenciáig*, pp. 112-13; Margaret Macmillan, *Paris 1919*, New York, 2003, p. 263.

³⁷ Arday, *Térkép, csata után*, pp. 160-61.

³⁸ Ormos, *Padovától Trianonig*, pp. 227-30; Romsics, *The Dismantling of Historic Hungary*, pp. 95-96; Miklós Lojtkó, ‘Brit békemissziók Közép-Európában. Smuts tábornok és Sir George Clerk tárgyalásai 1919-ben’, in (ed.) Tibor Frank, *Angliától Nagy-Britanniáig. Magyar kutatók tanulmányai a brit történelemről*, Budapest, 2004. pp. 327-32.

³⁹ Ormos, *Padovától Trianonig*, p. 230; Arday, *Térkép, csata után*, pp. 161-62; Romsics, *The Dismantling of Historic Hungary*, p. 96.

⁴⁰ Romsics, p. 100, based on Deák, *Hungary at the Paris Peace Conference*, p. 433.

⁴¹ His text was the following: ‘This committee should proceed from the assumption that the island of Grosse Schütt shall be excluded from Czeco-Slovak territory provided that in return a small enclave opposite Pressburg is ceded to the new Republic.’ Nicolson, *Peacemaking 1919*, p. 324.

⁴² *Ibid*.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 325; Herczegh, *A szarajevói merénylettől a potsdami konferenciáig*, pp. 114-15.

⁴⁴ Romsics, *The Dismantling of Historic Hungary*, p. 101.

⁴⁵ H. and C. Seton-Watson, *The Making of the New Europe*, pp. 365-371.

⁴⁶ Romsics, pp. 135-137.