

THE TERRITORIAL  
DISINTEGRATION OF  
HISTORIC HUNGARY,  
1818-1919

*A paper presented on the  
75th Anniversary of the signing  
of the Treaty of Trianon*

**THE TERRITORIAL DISINTEGRATION  
OF HISTORIC HUNGARY, 1918-1919**

A paper presented on the 75th Anniversary  
of the signing of the Treaty of Trianon

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## PART 'A'

In 1815, at the Congress of Vienna, which redrew the map of Europe following the Napoleonic War, the Duke of Wellington remarked:-

*"If only Peace were as easy to make as it is to make war!"*

104 years later, in the emotionally embittered atmosphere of post World War I Europe, the peace makers could have used a statement vision. Instead, the victorious powers were obsessed with punishing the defeated powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary. As a consequence, the feelings of injustice, and the desire for revenge, drove Europe into a Second World War in 1939. It was another soldier, 104 years after Wellington, Marshall Foch, who said in 1919:

*"This is not a Peace. This is merely a twenty year truce".*

The conditions of the Treaty of Versailles, signed with Germany, are relatively well known. All Year 10 History students throughout Queensland are familiar with the conditions of the Peace Treaty of Versailles, and how they were used by Adolph Hitler to rise to a position of absolute power. In contrast, the Year 12 History textbook has a one sentence statement of fact, that after Versailles, the Paris Peace Conference signed the Treaty of Trianon with Hungary.

Perhaps, today, we might be able to give you a little more detail about the background and the circumstances which led to the signing of the Treaty of Trianon.

Perhaps the best place to commence is 1100 years ago. Prior to the arrival of the Magyars in Europe, the Carpathian Basin was used as a temporary camping ground by successive waves of horsemen for the eastern Steppes, who ravaged the Roman Empire. Firstly came the Huns, then the Alans and then the Avars.

When the Magyars arrived on the Great Plain of the Central Danubian Basin of 896 AD, they came as settlers and conquerors. About 400,000 in number, they were a highly disciplined equestrian society, who had few problems in making themselves masters of the Great Plain. The scattered population of Slavs and Germans whom the Magyars found upon their arrival, were either driven off or assimilated.

The conquest of the Plains was followed by the subjugation of the mountain peripheries that encircled the new State. The coming of Christianity and Feudalism gave Hungary the trappings of a Western State. In foreign policy, the new Christian State competed with Byzantium for the leadership of the Balkans.

With a strong economy and a population of 5 million at a time when the total population of Europe was estimated at about 50 million, Hungary played a significant role as a Great Power, particularly in the role of the defender of Christianity against the Turks and other forces from the East. If its national life had continued undisturbed, Hungary would have achieved a substantial national unity in the modern sense. Unfortunately, the Turkish invasion cut short the growth of Hungarian civilization.

Following the defeat of the Turks (after 160 years occupation), a great wave of immigration began, for the de-populated areas had to be re-settled. The new settlers, granted concessions and privileges, became Imperial, rather than Hungarian, subjects.

By 1914 Hungary appeared to be a strong, self-confident, stable and prosperous State. Its population was on the increase and its economy was sound, with industrial and agrarian growth rates which had few parallels in Europe. Its spectacular economic development in the half-century before the War was aided by the country's compact and self-contained geographical units, and followed a blueprint of economic centralization. All forms of communication and transport led to the capital, Budapest.

Politically, Hungary was beginning to assert itself over Austria, its co-ruler within the Habsburg Monarchy. It appeared to be the more dynamic partner.

Internationally, Austria-Hungary was a great power which occupied a powerful position within the European balance of power system.

The assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo on June 28th, 1914, triggered a chain of events, which, a month later, led to Austria-Hungary's declaration of war on Serbia.

Following the four years of World War I, the Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed. On October 16, 1918, Hungary declared its complete independence from Austria. Hungarian aspirations for complete independence were finally satisfied. The declaration was also one of the last acts of the old regime.

The old order passed into history when the conservative Prime Minister, Count John Hadik, resigned, and on October 31, 1918, the "Homo Regius", the Archduke Joseph, appointed Michael Károlyi as Prime Minister of Hungary. Count Michael Károlyi had not made a secret of his pro-Entente sympathies before and during World War I. The conservative political establishment understood that their pro-German loyalties during the War would be held in poor stead by the victorious Allies. Some of them serving their support behind the new Prime Minister. Others adopted a wait and see attitude. Károlyi's government comprised a coalition of bourgeois political parties, and moderate socialists and trade unionists. Even the extreme socialists decided to give the new government a period of grace by calling for a six weeks suspension of its class struggle.

The problems facing the new government were enormous. The entire political and administrative organization of the country was in a state of collapse. The economic situation was utterly appalling. Years of Allied Blockade had resulted in terrible sufferings. Food riots had broken out in the starving cities, and in the countryside, land-hungry peasants looted nearby estates. A war-weary and angry population, demanded peace.

This was thought to have been achieved by the Diaz-Weber Armistice signed at Padua on November 3, 1918, which was still considered to be legally valid.

The Hungarians, therefore, were quite disturbed by the arrival in Belgrade of General Franchet de Esperey, the French Commander of the Allied Army of the Orient, with 47 Divisions. The General permitted the occupation of territory in South Hungary up as far as the Danube, by 7 Serbian Divisions. When the Hungarians approached the General about this apparent violation of the Armistice, they were informed that the Diaz-Weber Armistice was relevant only to the Italian front, and that he and he alone, was empowered to make a treaty with Hungary. The Government discussed the situation and decided to send a negotiating team to Belgrade.

At the heart of Károlyi's foreign policy was the preservation of his country's territorial integrity. This basic aim was common to all the parties in Hungary. But there was a fundamental difference between the Károlyi government and those of its predecessors. Michael Károlyi and his Minister for Nationalities, Oscar Jászi, wished to transform Historic Hungary from its semi-feudal political structure to a progressive, democratic republic. They planned to use the principle of national self determination to restructure the multi-national State into a confederation of autonomous regions.

They foresaw that the shifting of political frontiers within the borders of the Danube basin would not solve any of the problems of nationality, but on the contrary, create new and more complex ones. They proposed to establish a cantonal federation along the lines of an Eastern Switzerland.

However, in November, 1918, the Károlyi government found itself with a very delicate "nationality question". Hungary's national minorities, radicalized by the war, now sought national self fulfilment. Croatia's succession from Hungary had already been recognized before Károlyi came to power.

Károlyi and Jászi held few illusions. They realized that their ideas for an Eastern Switzerland would win little support among the excited national minorities. Moreover, they were aware of the promises that the Allied Powers had made to the subject nationalities of Austria-Hungary during the War.

Nevertheless, if Historic Hungary could maintain its territorial integrity until the decisions of the Paris Peace Conference became known, the government was confident that any changes of territory that occurred would be in the spirit of Wilsonian principles. A frenzied land-grab, in view of the emotionally charged atmosphere of post-war Europe, had to be avoided. The application of democratic principles would at least guarantee the rapid post-war economic reconstruction of Eastern Europe. **However, if democratic principles were waived in favour of military might, and political opportunism, the result would be lasting racial embitterment and hatred for generations to come.**

It was with these points in mind that the Hungarian delegation left for Belgrade to discuss the Armistice terms with General d'Esperey. Their reception by the General came as a great shock.

The General took every opportunity to humiliate the members of the Delegation. Upon being introduced to Baron Hatvany, he made no attempt to disguise his anti-Semitism, saying: "Ah, I see you must be a Jew by your nose". He then inquired in a cynical manner if "the socialist", Bokányi, understood French.

In reply to Károlyi's manifesto, the General read a short note, reproaching the Hungarians in violent terms for their alliance with Germany:

"You marched with them, you will be punished with them. Hungary will pay ..... you offended France ..... you suppressed the national minorities ..... I hold them in the palm of my hand. A word from me and they will annihilate you".

The General concluded by saying:

"You have come too late. Your declaration of neutrality may have been of use to you two weeks ago, but not now that I am in Belgrade. My sole reason for having received you is that Count Michael Károlyi is the head of the delegation. We got to know him during the war as an honest man. In these critical times, he is the only man who can help you".

This confirmed two things for the Hungarians. Firstly, Hungary was regarded as a second rate defeated enemy power with a low claim to the attention of the victorious Allied Powers.

Secondly, it confirmed that Michael Károlyi was the only man who could possibly bring Hungary through these troubled times. Consequently, all Hungary had temporarily united behind Károlyi in the belief that his government would be treated much more favourably by the Entente than any other.

Whatever illusions remained were soon shattered. A demarcation line was drawn in South Hungary which ran through the cities of Pécs, Baja and Subotica as far as the Maros River. It then ran north along the Maros to Bistrita. The territories that were thus detached from Hungary and subject to Allied military occupation, were the Voivodina and the Bánát in the South, and all Eastern Transylvania.

If the Hungarians were disappointed about the drawing of the demarcation lines, their neighbours were even more so.

The demarcation lines were drawn almost exclusively to cater for Serbian interests. The Rumanians were alarmed by the Serbian occupation of the Bánát, which was promised to them in the Secret Treaty of 1916. Nor could the Rumanians understand why the demarcation line was drawn at the Maros River, when all Transylvania had been promised to them. The Czechs were also in a state of nervous anxiety. The Allies had recognized a Czecho Slovak State, and yet no demarcation lines of any nature affected northern Hungary.

Franchet d'Esperey, whom Lloyd George had previously described as the "most single failure of the whole war", had again left his mark, this time in Eastern Europe. There was tension, uncertainty and anxiety in all the capitals of Eastern Europe. Nationalist passions ran high. By not taking any immediate action to settle this uncertainty, the Entente committed a great blunder. It was from this point that the Successor States assumed an aggressive policy. They were determined to occupy as much Hungarian territory as possible and thus confront the Peace Conference with a fait accompli. The course of East European history was to be decided through misunderstanding and tragedy.

#### Attempts to Establish Diplomatic Relations

Following the conclusion of the Belgrade Armistice, Károlyi launched himself into the establishment of direct diplomatic relations with the Entente.

On November 26 he sent a diplomatic note to each of the Allied and Associated powers.

The Allies had rejected the idea of entering into diplomatic relations with Hungary until the eventual signing of the Peace Treaty. This, however, was never officially communicated to the Károlyi government. Faced with a blank wall of silence, Hungary's international isolation became increasingly apparent. The Hungarian Government was unable to follow any policy, other than that of renewing, again and again, its attempts to penetrate the Entente's silence.

On November 27, an appeal by Károlyi for a personal meeting between himself and unofficial Allied representatives in Paris, or elsewhere, was rejected.

When he attempted to arouse British public opinion through Major Goetz - a British Officer who had been interned in Hungary throughout the war - the Foreign Office forbade Goetz to make public Károlyi's letter, because "it may upset our Czech and Rumanian allies".

Just as all the numerous attempts to open communications with the Allied ended in failure, so did the measures to establish diplomatic representation in neutral countries. Austria was the only country in which a Hungarian Embassy was established during the Károlyi regime.

Oscar Jászi, in the meantime, was negotiating with the national minorities of Hungary. Jászi's talks with the Ruthenes of north-east Hungary, and the substantial German minority within the country, had been successful. Both of these peoples were granted autonomy with fairly wide legislative powers. Discussions with the Serbian Government about the return of certain territories in South Hungary also showed promise.

#### The Loss of Slovakia

In order to maintain harmonious race relations and to facilitate the signing of mutually advantageous commercial treaties, Jászi opened negotiations with the Slovak leader, Milan Hodza on November 22.

Agreement was reached on a provisional demarcation line between Hungary and Slovakia on December 6, 1918. The frontiers were acceptable to both parties. As the Hungarian forces withdrew, two Czech divisions advanced cautiously up to the line.

In the meantime, the Czech Foreign Minister, Edward Benes, had been engaged in intensive diplomatic lobbying in Paris. He successfully obtained the approval of the French Government for a new and much more favourable demarcation line. Prague immediately disavowed the Hodza negotiations, claiming that Milan Hodza was not an accredited representative of the Czech Government.

On December 23, Colonel Vix, the head of the Allied Military Mission in Budapest, received instructions from Paris. He was to order the Hungarians to withdraw from Bratislava, Kosice, Presov and predominantly, ethnically pure Hungarian territory north of the Danube. Károlyi protested most vehemently and bitterly over the new demarcation line, however the Hungarian forces withdrew in good order.

Károlyi was not the only one to protest. In an emotionally worded telegram to his superior, General Henrys, Colonel Vix stated that the decision had turned the Belgrade Armistice into nothing more than "a scrap of paper". In a reply from Paris, Vix was told to "treat the Károlyi Government as merely a local authority without international status".

To all of his protests, Károlyi was eventually to receive **one reply**. This came from general d'Esperey, who stated that the Hungarians were wasting their time in protesting over the violations of the Armistice. His interpretation was that even though the Armistice made no mention of northern Hungary, this did not prejudice decisions taken subsequently by the Allies.

Whereas the Hungarians were not even permitted to reach first base, the Czechs had the full support of the Allied Governments. Czech diplomacy had achieved its objectives, prior to the opening of the Peace Conference, despite the fact that they fought on the same side with Hungary in the war.

### The Loss of Transylvania

Oscar Jászi's negotiations with the leaders of the Transylvanian Rumanians, at Arad, in mid-November, 1918, had broken down completely. No agreement could be reached on any point. On December 1, at Alba Julia, the Transylvanian Rumanians voted for union with Rumania.

The Bucharest Government was anxious to follow up the Alba Julia Declaration with the military occupation of all Transylvania. To this end, it was encouraged and assisted by General Berthelot, Commander of the French Army of the Danube, stationed in Rumania. On December 16, General Berthelot, arbitrarily, and without the knowledge of Paris, drew up a demarcation line which ran through the Magyar cities of Szatmárnémeti (Satu Mare), Nagykároly (Carei Mare), and Nagyvárad (Oradea Mare) to Békéscsaba. All Hungarian forces were ordered to withdraw behind the line.

Two days later, Vix received a second order from Berthelot, requiring him to order the Hungarians to withdraw from Kolosvár (Cluj), the ancient capital of Transylvania, as well. Neither Károlyi's nor Vix's protests were of any use. Károlyi ordered Hungarian troops not to resist the Rumanian advance.

Columns of panic stricken refugees clogged the roads to Budapest bringing with them tales of Rumanian atrocities. The Rumanian army occupied the city on December 24.

The successive Armistice violations had devastating internal results, including several Cabinet changes. With each new armistice violation, the population became more bewildered, humiliated, embittered and frustrated. The Entente refused even to speak to them. All their protests were ignored.

All Transylvania was now in Rumanian hands. They had reached the limits of the Secret Treaty of 1916. **The Rumanians, like the Czechs, had achieved their maximum territorial demands prior to the opening of the Paris Peace Conference. In both cases, the French had ignored the terms and conditions of the Belgrade Armistice. Moreover they had acted without consultation with any of their Great Power Allies.**

### The Taylor and Coolidge Missions

The first glimmer of hope for Hungary came early in the New Year with the arrival of two American fact-finding missions. The first, led by Alonzo Taylor, arrived on January 9, 1919 and the second, led by Professor Archibald Coolidge, on January 15. It was obvious to the members of both Missions that this had been the first opportunity that the Károlyi Government had had, to put its case before any Allied Representatives.

Both Taylor and Coolidge were impressed by the sincerity of the Hungarians and the legitimacy of their grievances. Their reports unreservedly condemned the Czech and Rumanian actions.

They reported on the disastrous economic conditions in the country resulting from the blockade and the invasions. Food and clothing were scarce and expensive. Since most of Hungary's raw materials, including 4/5ths of the coal mines, were in the occupied territories, industry and transport came grinding to a halt. Crowds of unemployed workers roamed the streets looking for distraction. Moreover, the refugee population had caused severe overcrowding and a dangerous political situation.

Despite the reports, nothing has been changed. The blockade was not lifted. All half-hearted American diplomatic efforts to at least obtain the release of coal, ended in failure. Factories continued to close down. The unemployed became more radicalized and polarised.

### The Vix Ultimatum

On February 19, the Rumanian Prime Minister, Ioan Bratianu, addressed the Committee on Rumanian Affairs. He requested an extension of the Rumanian occupation a further 45 miles into Hungarian territory, and then a further 10 miles beyond that for a neutral zone. He justified this by four arguments. Firstly, the additional occupation would prevent the almost daily flare-ups between Rumanian and Hungarian forces. Secondly, it would stop the spread of Bolshevik ideas coming from Hungary. Thirdly, the new line would give the Rumanians a much more advantageous strategic position from which to defend themselves in case of Hungarian attack. Fourthly, Rumania could not possibly provide troops for Marshall Foch's proposed march towards the East, unless its western border with Hungary was secured.

An essential feature of Marshall Foch's plan for the invasion of Russia, was to obtain control of the railway networks of Eastern Hungary. It was imperative that all rail links should be in Allied occupied territory. Irrespective of any moral, ethnological or political considerations, additional territory needed to be taken from Hungary and given to Rumania. The Neutral Zone was merely additional protection for the railway. The Committee approved Bratianu's Resolution.

The French Military faction gained another victory. Since the new demarcation line was military in character and not political, Marshall Foch could implement the decision at will, and without any further reference to the Peace Conference. Consequently he ordered Franchet d'Esperey to prepare the Rumanian forces for the advance.

The Hungarian Government was not informed about the February 26 decision. However, rumours began to appear in the Hungarian press. By this stage, Hungarian political attitudes had hardened. They had been pushed as far as they would go. They were not going to retreat any further. This new determination was reflected in Károlyi's speech to the troops of the Székely Division on March 2.

"I am convinced that the democratic and socially-conscious public opinion in America and the Entente will protest against this amputation ..... We will never, never, consent to it ..... Hungary holds unshakeably to a Wilsonian peace ..... But let the world hear and understand too, that if the Paris Peace Conference decides against the Wilsonian principles, against the right of peoples to self-determination, and against a peace of mutual understanding, then as an extreme necessity, we will liberate our country by force of arms".

This was a desperate cry for help. Disillusionment with the Government's pro-Western orientation was felt universally throughout the country. The West had replied with cynicism and insincerity. The mood in the country was one of resentment, betrayal, impotence and hopelessness. The hopes that had been placed in the Taylor and Coolidge missions had long since disappeared. The government and the people were psychologically ready to experiment with a new foreign policy orientation. Since the West had failed them, the Hungarians began to look towards the East for national salvation.



On March 20, 1919, Colonel Vix presented the February decision in the form of an ultimatum, to be answered within 32 hours. The delay in its presentation was caused because of the concern over the possibility of a Russian-Hungarian military link-up.

There was no doubt that the ultimatum would bring down the Karolyi government. Consequently, it was not considered wise to deliver the ultimatum until Ruthenia had been occupied by Allied troops.

President Károlyi, Prime Minister Dénes Berinkey, and Minister for Defence, William Böhm, received Colonel Vix's delegation at 10am. All three men agreed that the new demarcation line was completely unacceptable. It virtually reduced Hungary to a city-state around Budapest. Károlyi suggested that what was left of Hungary may as well be made a Colony of either Rumania or Czechoslovakia. When Vix denied the allegation that the Allies were intent on dismembering Hungary, Berinkey simply shrugged his shoulders and said that **Hungary had already experienced the worth of Allied Treaties**. Böhm's contribution was to point out that the Government could not hope to last for a single day. Vix's reply was: "I could not care less".

Immediately following the audience, Böhm consulted the General Staff. Their report was on Károlyi's table within an hour. It recommended that rejection of the ultimatum, immediate mass conscription, a compromise with the Communists, and an alliance with Soviet Russia. An emergency Cabinet Session approved the recommendations, unanimously voted for resignation, and sent a top level delegation to reach an understanding with Béla Kun, the Communist Leader.

Károlyi, in the meantime, had been unseated in a well organised coup. A forged letter, bearing Károlyi's resignation in favour of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, appeared in print. Károlyi had no way of issuing a denial.