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Hungary and the “Third Europe” in 1938

The period of the 1930s has been called the time of the “Diplomatic War.”¹ During these years Nazi Germany seized the initiative in international affairs and tried to impose its will on the other states of Europe. The reaction of Britain and France to the threat of German expansion was appeasement until March 1939, when, with Hitler’s occupation of Bohemia and Moravia, it became clear that the Führer’s aims were not limited to the German-inhabited areas. Thus the states of East Central Europe found themselves in a highly vulnerable position: in the West they faced increasing political and economic pressure from the Reich; in the East there was the Soviet Union with its very exportable Communist ideology which would have undermined the political and social order of all these states. In this situation the East Central European states all sought some way of being independent from their two powerful neighbors.

Attempts in 1938 to form a Third Europe constitute an example of these efforts to remain independent, for the basic notion was to create a bloc of neutral countries between Russia and Germany. The Polish foreign minister, Józef Beck, proposed a bloc composed of Poland, Hungary, Rumania, Yugoslavia, and Italy, which would be capable of opposing both German and Russian expansion.² As a prerequisite for the formation of such a bloc, he postulated the establishment of a common Polish-Hungarian frontier through Hungarian annexation of the territory it had lost to Czechoslovakia.

Hungary and Italy were especially interested in this plan. Associated with Hungarian interest in the formation of the Third Europe were a number of domestic and foreign political factors, but most important was the goal of revising the Treaty of Trianon. The territory which Hungary lost after the First World War included Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia to Czechoslovakia; Transylvania to Rumania; Croatia-Slavonia to Yugoslavia; and a small strip of Western territory, the Burgenland, to Austria. During the interwar years the aim of Hungarian foreign policy was to regain part or all of these territories. Given this common goal, the conservative and radical wings of the Government Party each developed different programs on how to achieve this revision. The Conservative Right advocated the “free-hand”

1. Hugh Seton-Watson, *Eastern Europe Between the Wars, 1918–1941* (New York, 1967; first pub. 1945), p. 382.

2. Roman Debicki, *Foreign Policy of Poland, 1919–1939* (New York, 1962), pp. 112–13.

orientation which opposed one-sided reliance on any state, and sought, by keeping open as many alternatives as possible, to enable Hungary to take advantage of international developments to obtain revision. The Radical Right emphasized the need for close cooperation with Germany if Hungary was to obtain its revisionist goals.³ To those statesmen advocating the “free-hand” policy, the idea of the Third Europe had a twofold appeal: creation of a large bloc of neutral states in East Central Europe would help protect Hungary from German influence; and since the creation of such a group assumed the establishment of a common Polish-Hungarian border through Hungarian annexation of Czechoslovak territory, the formation of the Third Europe would also serve the cause of revision in Czechoslovakia. Thus recovery of territory lost to Czechoslovakia was considered by the “free-hand” orientation to be a means of enabling Hungary to remain independent of Germany. Opponents of this orientation likewise favored revision in Czechoslovakia, but disliked the potentially anti-German tone of such action in the context of the Third Europe.

Italy also supported the idea of the Third Europe, calling it a “Horizontal Axis.” Despite formation of the Rome-Berlin Axis in October 1936, and Italian adherence to the Anticomintern Pact in November 1937, Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano was apprehensive regarding the consequences for Italy which an increase in German influence in Southeast Europe would have. Ciano counted on the Anschluss as a certainty even though he considered it contrary to Italy’s interests, and therefore sought to build up a bloc in East Central Europe supported by Italy along the lines advocated by Beck. Such a group of states, though not hostile to Germany, would be capable of resisting German pressure on Italy and Southeast Europe that was bound to come after the Anschluss. As early as March 1937, Ciano told Prince Paul of Yugoslavia that the Anschluss was “inevitable.” “When Vienna becomes the second German capital,” he said, “Budapest should be ours.”⁴

The first efforts to realize the formation of a Third Europe involved attempts to coordinate Polish and Hungarian foreign policy. As early as 1920 there had been negotiations between Poland and Hungary concerning the possibility of establishing a common border, in the course of which Hungary offered military aid to Poland in the Polish-Soviet war and in return Warsaw

3. For discussion of the radical and conservative wings of the Government Party which dominated Hungarian politics during the interwar years see István Deák, “Hungary,” in Hans Rogger and Eugen Weber, eds., *The European Right* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1965), pp. 364–405; and C. A. Macartney, *October Fifteenth: A History of Modern Hungary, 1929–1945*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1961), 1:28–29, 124–32.

4. Minutes of conversation between Prince Paul and Ciano, Mar. 25, 1937. Cited in J. B. Hoptner, *Yugoslavia in Crisis, 1934–1941* (New York, 1962), p. 83.

promised support of Hungarian revisionist claims in Czechoslovakia and relaxation of the military restrictions imposed by the Treaty of Trianon.⁵ Although nothing came of these negotiations, the idea of establishing a common border still did not die out. Relegated to the background during the twenties and early thirties, it came forward again in 1936 when a Polish government delegation visited Budapest.⁶ Then in early 1938, with the prospect of German annexation of Austria looming ominously over Europe, hope for a common border became linked with Polish and Hungarian efforts to preserve their national independence.

At the invitation of the Polish government the Hungarian regent, Admiral Miklós Horthy, Foreign Minister Kálmán Kánya, and other high-ranking Hungarian statesmen paid an official visit to Poland, February 5–10, 1938.⁷ Though confined largely to generalities, these talks nevertheless appear to have helped provide a basis for future cooperation. There seems to have been agreement that the Anschluss would take place within the next few months, that afterwards the Czechoslovak question would become acute, and that both states had common goals in regard to Czechoslovakia. Also from this meeting emerged the notion of building a bloc of states in the East. The Polish envoy in Budapest reported that the Poles and Hungarians agreed on the necessity of cooperation between Rome, Belgrade, Bucharest, Budapest, and Warsaw to counter German influence.⁸

These Hungarian-Polish contacts encouraged the Italians in their hopes of forming a "Horizontal Axis." Shortly after Horthy's return from Poland, Ciano told the Hungarian representative in Rome that the Anschluss was "inevitable" and that Czechoslovakia's "fate was sealed"; as soon as Czechoslovakia collapsed, Hungary ought to obtain a common border with Poland. Furthermore, Italy would be able to hold its own in the Rome-Berlin Axis

5. P. S. Wandycz, *France and Her Eastern Allies, 1919–1925: French-Czechoslovak-Polish Relations from the Paris Peace Conference to Locarno* (Minneapolis, 1962), pp. 191–92.

6. László Zsigmond, ed., *Diplomáciai iratok Magyarország külpolitikájához, 1936–1945*, vol. 2: Magda Ádám, ed., *A müncheni egyezmény létrejötte és Magyarország külpolitikája, 1936–1938* (Budapest, 1965), no. 17 (hereafter cited as *DIMK*).

7. Microfilms of the Captured German Documents, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as GD). Moltke to Foreign Office, Warsaw, Feb. 12, 1938, 750/353929–936.

8. *DIMK*, vol. 1: Lajos Kerekes, ed., *A Berlin-Róma tengely kialakulása és Ausztria annexiója, 1936–1938* (Budapest, 1962), nos. 354, 357; vol. 2, no. 123, n. 115; Unsigned Secret Memorandum on conversation with Csáky from the German Legation in Budapest to Foreign Office, Budapest, Feb. 1938, GD, 750/353975–978; Erdmannsdorff to Foreign Office on conversation with Kánya, Budapest, Feb. 15, 1938, GD, 1454/D600767–770; Jan Szembek, *Journal, 1933–1939* (Paris, 1952), Feb. 16, 1938. Other interpretations of these talks may be found in Nándor A. F. Dreisziger, *Hungary's Way to World War II* (Astor Park, Fla., and Toronto, 1968), pp. 72–74; and Macartney, *October Fifteenth*, 1:209.

only if the Third Europe came into being, because the combined strength of this bloc would enable it to maintain good relations with Germany without allowing German interference in internal affairs.⁹

Italian interest in this kind of cooperation led to an invitation for Beck to visit Rome in early March 1938. In his memoirs Beck wrote, "Mussolini did not see any possibility of checking the German pressure in Austria and Czechoslovakia, but . . . he seriously apprehended [that is, was gravely concerned with the possibility of] any more German action in a southeasterly direction."¹⁰ Beck, Mussolini, and Ciano agreed that passivity in the face of German expansion would be dangerous, and that bonds uniting Poland and Italy "to other countries with a similar political situation and interest, viz. Yugoslavia, Hungary, and Roumania" should be strengthened. At the same time it would, of course, be necessary to stay on good terms with Germany.¹¹ In these conversations one of the contradictions in the concept of the Third Europe is apparent. There was, on the one hand, the desire to form a bloc of states that would be friendly toward the Reich but not dominated by it; on the other hand, the impetus for the creation of such an entity was fear of Germany and desire to face Germany collectively rather than alone. Berlin came to emphasize the latter aspect, and considered the whole idea a thinly disguised plan to build an anti-German barrier in the East.¹² That Hitler should try to counter the plan was only natural.

Prognostications concerning the prospects of Anschluss in early 1938 proved, as we all know, to be correct. With German troops in Austria, the Reich surrounded Czechoslovakia on three sides, thus making it possible to cut the Czechoslovak state in half by a simultaneous attack from Upper Silesia and Austria. In addition, Germany acquired a common frontier with Hungary, Yugoslavia, and Italy, which facilitated the spread of German political and economic influence into the area.

The attitude of the Hungarian government toward the Anschluss was determined primarily by revisionist aims in Czechoslovakia and by the policy of the Western powers. Foreign Minister Kánya told the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chamber of Deputies on March 23 that only military intervention by the Western powers could have saved Austrian independence; Hungary did not have the military capability even to consider defending Austria against the Reich.¹³ The undersecretary of state for foreign affairs

9. *DIMK*, vol. 1, no. 382.

10. Jozef Beck, *Final Report* (New York, 1957), p. 143.

11. Malcolm Muggeridge, ed., *Ciano's Diary, 1937-1938* (London, 1952), Mar. 9, 1938.

12. *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945* (Washington, D.C., 1949-66), series D, vol. 5, no. 64 (hereafter cited as *DGFP*).

13. *DIMK*, vol. 1, no. 448.

told the American representative in Budapest that the Anschluss was a logical development of British and French policy, which had created a large number of small states in East Central Europe without providing adequate support of their independence.¹⁴

In regard to Czechoslovakia, Budapest hoped to exploit Germany in recovering the lost territory. This idea was expressed on a number of occasions. When Hermann Göring informed the Hungarian envoy in Berlin about the Anschluss on the evening of March 12, the latter did not even mention the Austrian situation. Instead, he asked Göring "when Czechoslovakia's turn" would come.¹⁵ Furthermore, the official organ of the Hungarian Foreign Office, *Pester Lloyd*, published several articles connecting the Anschluss with Czechoslovakia.¹⁶ Then on April 24 the Hungarian Revision League met for the first time in five years in a public rally attended by several thousand people. It demanded that the Hungarian minority in Czechoslovakia receive the same treatment accorded the Sudeten Germans, and passed a resolution condemning Czechoslovakia.¹⁷

Yet along with these efforts to exploit the German-Czechoslovak dispute in Hungary's own interest, Kánya—who supported the "free-hand" policy—sought by cooperation with Poland, Rumania, Yugoslavia, and Italy to avoid dependence on the Reich. It was in this context that negotiations with the Little Entente took place.

The states that had gained the most territory at Hungary's expense after the war—Czechoslovakia, Rumania, and Yugoslavia—were joined in an alliance called the Little Entente, pledging military aid in the event any member was attacked by Hungary in an effort to regain some of its former territory. Because of Czechoslovak leadership in the group, Hungarian statesmen considered Prague the mainstay of the Little Entente, and believed that if Czechoslovakia could be weakened or isolated from its partners the whole edifice would collapse. Such a possibility seemed not at all remote in the spring of 1938.

Indication of Hungarian willingness to negotiate with the Little Entente had come already in late 1936. The Foreign Office perceived that behind a façade of unity the states of the Little Entente were divided by their various policies in regard to the great powers—especially Germany—and hoped that

14. State Department Records, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as SD). Minister in Hungary to Secretary of State, Mar. 23, 1938, 863.00/1648.

15. *DIMK*, vol. 1, no. 408.

16. *Pester Lloyd*, morning edition, Mar. 20, 1938, "Der Anschluss und das Sudeten-deutschum"; morning edition, Mar. 29, 1938, "Das tschechische Problem"; and evening edition, Apr. 14, 1938, "Italien und das Schicksal der Tschecho-Slowakei."

17. *Pester Lloyd*, evening edition, Apr. 25, 1938, "Die Vollversammlung der Ungarischen Revisionsliga."

this antagonism eventually would lead to collapse of the group.¹⁸ Yugoslavia and Rumania did not consider themselves directly threatened by the Reich, and therefore sought to protect themselves against future confrontations by improving relations with Berlin and Rome. At a conference of representatives of the Little Entente in September 1936, Yugoslavia and Rumania rejected Czechoslovak proposals to broaden the alliance from a narrow one promising mutual assistance in case of a Hungarian attack to a general mutual assistance pact which would have been effective in case one of the partners was threatened by a state other than Hungary.¹⁹ Knowing the unwillingness of Yugoslavia and Rumania to support their ally against Germany, Budapest's aim was somehow to leave Czechoslovakia out of an agreement with Rumania and Yugoslavia, despite insistence of the three states that they would negotiate with Hungary only as a unit and not as separate countries.²⁰

The Hungarian government made three basic demands in negotiations with the Little Entente: a mutual declaration renouncing resort to war in settling their disputes, unconditional recognition of Hungary's right to rearm, and the conclusion of satisfactory agreements protecting the rights of Hungarian minorities living in the states of the Little Entente.²¹ The issue of the Hungarian minority was the critical point, because Budapest used it to accomplish its aim of differentiating between Czechoslovakia and the other two states. In Czechoslovakia, where the Hungarian government admitted that the Hungarian minority was treated better than anywhere else, demands were higher than in Rumania and Yugoslavia.²² Since Prague did not want to grant such far-reaching demands when Budapest was asking less of Rumania and Yugoslavia, the Hungarian government hoped to use this as a means of isolating Czechoslovakia from its partners.

In the atmosphere of pending conflict between Germany and Czechoslovakia, the Little Entente finally accepted Budapest's demand that separate minority treaties be concluded. An agreement was signed at the meeting of the Council of the Little Entente in Bled, Yugoslavia, on August 23, 1938. The official communiqué stated that Hungary and the states of the Little Entente had concluded "provisional agreements" in which the Little Entente recognized the Hungarian right to rearm, and all renounced use of force in settling their disputes.²³ The communiqué did not mention the second part of the pact

18. Mackensen to Foreign Office, Berlin, Sept. 21, 1936, GD, 1060/426639-643.

19. *DIMK*, vol. 2, no. 36.

20. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, no. 254.

21. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, no. 83; Pochhammer to Foreign Office, Bucharest, Sept. 1, 1937, GD, 1060/426766; *Pester Lloyd*, Apr. 19, 1937, evening edition; Dreisziger, *Hungary's Way*, pp. 64-65.

22. *DIMK*, vol. 2, no. 279; *DGFP D*, vol. 5, nos. 141, 216; Erdmannsdorff to Foreign Office, Budapest, June 29, 1937, GD, 1060/426738-742.

23. Text of the communiqué is in *Documents on International Affairs, 1938*, ed. Monica Curtis, 2 vols. (London, 1942-43), 1:284.

—the conclusion of a protocol between Hungary, Yugoslavia, and Rumania promising to settle all issues which would prevent the further development of good relations.²⁴

The timing of the Bled Agreement shocked many observers, for it coincided not only with a period when Czechoslovak and German difficulties seemed to offer opportunity for revision but also with the official visit of Horthy, Kánya, and Prime Minister Béla Imrédy to Berlin. Clearly the agreement involved an attempt to assert independence from Germany. *Magyar Nemzet*, a newspaper founded in August by a group who supported the "free-hand" orientation, declared that the Bled Agreement had shown that Hungary was not a vassal of the Reich.²⁵ The Germans were incensed. Foreign Minister Ribbentrop declared that it indicated that Hungary was trying to move away from Germany.²⁶ An agreement to renounce force in regard to Czechoslovakia at this precise moment was not welcome.²⁷

According to the Hungarian interpretation, however, the Bled Agreement did not interfere with hopes of revision in Czechoslovakia. The Foreign Office asserted that the validity of the agreement depended on satisfactory conclusion of both parts. Since the second part had been signed only by Hungary, Yugoslavia, and Rumania, it followed from this reasoning that the Bled Agreement was in effect with them, but not with Czechoslovakia. Before the accord was signed, Kánya told the Hungarian representative in Bucharest that although it would be possible to draw up a final agreement with Yugoslavia and Rumania, the pact with Czechoslovakia depended on conclusion of a more far-reaching minority agreement than that reached with the other two countries.²⁸ *Pester Lloyd* called the Bled Agreement a "gentleman's agreement," which could be carried out only after an understanding about the situation of the Hungarian minority in each of the states concerned.²⁹ The American legation was also informed that the agreement was only between Rumania, Yugoslavia, and Hungary. There could be no accord with Czechoslovakia until settlement of the Sudeten German question.³⁰

The Bled Agreement thus allowed Hungary, for a brief time, to maintain a precarious balance. It fitted perfectly into the framework of forming a Third Europe by allowing the possibility of revision in Czechoslovakia to establish the common border, while at the same time improving relations with Rumania and Yugoslavia. Budapest had achieved its goal of distinguishing between

24. Text of both parts of the agreement is in *DIMK*, vol. 2, no. 301 a and b.

25. *Magyar Nemzet*, Aug. 30, 1938, Sándor Pethő, "Egy utazás végén."

26. *DGFP D*, vol. 2, no. 383.

27. Weizsäcker to German Legation in Prague, Berlin, Aug. 26, 1938, GD, 13/19081.

28. *DIMK*, vol. 2, no. 279.

29. *Pester Lloyd*, morning edition, Aug. 24, 1938, "Ungarn und die Kleine Entente."

30. Chargé d'Affaires in Hungary to Secretary of State, Aug. 26, 1938, SD, 770.00/572.

Prague and its partners. At the same time, the agreement was an assertion that Hungarian foreign policy was not to be dictated by the Reich.

Horthy, Kánya, and Imrédy needed, in Berlin, to have something in the nature of the Bled Agreement to fortify themselves against German pressure to cooperate in action against Czechoslovakia.³¹ They were informed that the Führer had decided to settle accounts with Czechoslovakia the next time Prague committed an "atrocious" act and that this would offer Hungary an opportunity to recover some of its lost territory. The Germans were still vague about how much of Czechoslovakia they would allow Hungary to obtain.³² Reports from Budapest confirmed the seriousness of the situation: German action against Czechoslovakia was to begin at the end of September or in early October.³³ In case any doubt remained, Hitler treated his Hungarian visitors to a display of German military might. At Kiel the Hungarians watched an exhibition of the German war fleet, a clever ploy considering that Horthy had been last commander in chief of the Austro-Hungarian navy.

Yet despite enormous pressure, Hungarian statesmen refrained from committing themselves to Germany. They did not rule out cooperation with the Reich in Czechoslovakia, but at the same time gave no assurances that they would do so.³⁴

Polish-Hungarian cooperation to obtain a common border, encouraged by limited Italian support, marked the last phase of attempts to realize the Third Europe. On September 8 the Hungarian representative in Warsaw proposed to Beck a Polish-Hungarian "gentlemen's agreement" to coordinate their policies in regard to Czechoslovakia.³⁵ Part of the idea was that the Hungarian and Polish minorities should have the same concessions as the

31. The question arises why Hitler should have been interested in Hungarian cooperation with Germany in "solving" the Czechoslovak question, when he obviously needed no military assistance. The answer lies in Hitler's plan on how to proceed against Czechoslovakia. In a directive for *Fall Grün*, the German code name for plans of aggression against Czechoslovakia, Hitler stated that Germany could not attack without an excuse, for this would arouse hostile world opinion and might lead to intervention of the Western powers. He therefore planned to use the Hungarian minority as well as the other nationalities along with the German minority to create a situation in which it would appear that Germany was occupying Czechoslovakia to restore order (*DGFP D*, vol. 2, no. 221 and also nos. 133, 175). Hitler was willing to bribe the Hungarians with vague promises of territorial acquisition in order to obtain their collaboration in this scheme.

32. Hungarian record of Horthy's talks with Keitel, Beck, Brautschitsch, Hitler, and Göring, August 1938, Hungarian Collection, World War II Records Division, National Archives, Alexandria, Virginia.

33. *DIMK*, vol. 2, no. 292.

34. Hungarian record of Horthy's talks with Keitel, Beck, Brautschitsch, Hitler, and Göring, August 1938, Hungarian Collection; *DGFP D*, vol. 2, nos. 402, 390, 392; Dreisziger, *Hungary's Way*, pp. 87-91; Macartney, *October Fifteenth*, 1:238-48.

35. Szembek, *Journal, 1933-1939*, Sept. 8, 1938.

Sudeten Germans, and since Hitler was demanding cession of the German area, Hungarian and Polish insistence on equal treatment for their minorities meant asking for cession of the Hungarian and Polish inhabited areas.³⁶ However, the ethnic Hungarian areas were concentrated along the Slovak and Ruthenian border with Hungary, and annexation of these districts would not form the common border with Poland. The area of Teschen, which was demanded by the Poles, was not contiguous to the Hungarian districts.³⁷ Naturally, then, Budapest was interested not only in the territory with a large Hungarian population, but in somehow regaining Hungary's historic borders through annexation of Slovakia and Ruthenia. Beck urged the Hungarians to accomplish this by demanding a plebiscite in all the former Hungarian territory of Czechoslovakia.³⁸ Kánya agreed to try this, and just before Hitler's second meeting with Chamberlain at Godesberg, September 22–23, escalated his demands to include a plebiscite among the Slovaks and Ruthenians, believing that they would opt for union with Hungary.³⁹

Italy supported Hungarian and Polish demands. Ciano thought that Warsaw and Budapest should "reinforce their action—Germany must not be the only one to profit from this situation."⁴⁰ Mussolini concurred. Indeed, it was Mussolini who insisted on discussion of the Hungarian and Polish minorities in Czechoslovakia during the conference of Britain, France, Germany, and Italy at Munich on September 29. Ciano wrote, "The others, without exception, would gladly have said nothing about it. In fact they try to evade its discussion."⁴¹ Thus, as a result of the Italian intervention, the question of Polish and Hungarian minorities was mentioned in two places in the Munich Agreement: the Annex to the agreement made the German and Italian guarantee of Czechoslovakia dependent on the settlement of Polish and Hungarian claims, and an Additional Declaration provided for another Four Power meeting if the problem of Polish and Hungarian minorities in Czechoslovakia had not been settled within three months.⁴² Following the signature of the Munich Agreement, Warsaw and Budapest used different methods to implement their policies toward Czechoslovakia. The Poles were willing to

36. *DIMK*, vol. 2, no. 338.

37. The Duchy of Teschen had been in dispute between Poland and Czechoslovakia since the end of the First World War. The Poles claimed three districts on ethnic grounds, while the Czechs maintained historic claims to the whole area. In 1920, at the height of the Polish-Soviet war, the Conference of Ambassadors divided it between Poland and Czechoslovakia. The Poles were very bitter about this, because they believed the Czechs had taken unfair advantage of them.

38. *DIMK*, vol. 2, no. 343.

39. *Ibid.*, nos. 364, 380; *DGFP D*, vol. 2, no. 586.

40. *Ciano's Diary*, Sept. 19, 1938.

41. *Ibid.*, Sept. 29–30, 1938.

42. *DGFP D*, vol. 2, no. 675.

use force, and hoped that the Hungarians would do the same.⁴³ On September 30 Warsaw dispatched an ultimatum to Prague demanding that the districts it claimed be evacuated immediately. Prague yielded, and Polish troops immediately began to occupy these districts.⁴⁴

Hungary chose the way of negotiation. A note was sent to the Czechoslovak government asking for negotiations to begin "for the purpose of giving effect to the right of self-determination of nationalities on full terms of equality with the right of the Sudeten Germans."⁴⁵ This was followed by another note proposing that the negotiations be held at Komárom (Czechoslovak: Komarno). The note also demanded that Hungarian political prisoners be set free immediately, that Hungarian soldiers in the Czech army be discharged, and that two or three frontier towns be ceded to Hungary as a symbolic gesture.⁴⁶

At a time, then, when events showed that Prague was yielding in every case to threat of force, the Hungarians decided to negotiate rather than follow the Polish example of simply occupying the territory claimed. Certainly an important consideration in this regard was Hungarian military weakness. Disarmed by the treaty, Hungary had been receiving some armaments from Germany since 1936, but these were of very poor quality.⁴⁷ An open rearmament program began only in March 1938. Through the establishment of the Horthy National Aviation Fund on the occasion of the regent's seventieth birthday on June 18, 1938, the Hungarians tried to build the rudiments of an air force. This fund was supported by contributions from the government, industry, and various private organizations, with civil servants of various governmental departments "offering" to contribute a small percentage of their salaries.⁴⁸ Only in early September did the government introduce general conscription. Various irregular troops completed the picture. There is no question that whatever Hungarian army existed at this time was for the most part untrained and poorly equipped. When General Keitel visited Budapest in June 1938, he was appalled at the condition of the Hungarian military. Reportedly he made some caustic remarks about "too many pot-bellied officers, insufficient men, and poor equipment."⁴⁹ It was, therefore, scarcely surprising

43. Henryk Batowski, "Le voyage de Joseph Beck en Roumanie en octobre 1938," *Annuaire polonais des affaires internationales, 1959-1960* (Warsaw, 1960), p. 148.

44. E. L. Woodward and Rohan Butler, eds., *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939*, series 3, vol. 3 (London, 1950), no. 101; Anna M. Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers, 1938-1939* (London and Toronto, 1968), pp. 140-43.

45. Copy of the Hungarian Note, Oct. 2, 1938, GD, 1055/423050.

46. *DGFP D*, vol. 4, no. 22.

47. Interview with the former Hungarian military attaché in Berlin, Kálmán Hárty.

48. *Pester Lloyd*, morning edition, June 19, 1938, "Ungarns Flügel"; Chargé d'Affaires in Hungary to Secretary of State, June 27, 1938, SD, 864.248/7.

49. Chargé d'Affaires in Hungary to Secretary of State, July 12, 1938, SD, 762.64/106.

that Hungarian statesmen were reluctant to risk an armed conflict with Czechoslovakia.

Negotiations began on October 9 at Komárom, a picturesque little town of baroque church spires situated on the Czechoslovak side of the Hungarian-Czechoslovak border, on the Danube River. Kánya demanded the right of self-determination for Slovakia and Ruthenia through a plebiscite under international supervision, and cession of an area in southern Slovakia and Ruthenia which, according to the Hungarian census of 1910, contained a Hungarian majority.⁵⁰ These demands were, of course, rejected. The negotiations bogged down, and were broken off by Kánya on October 13.

After the first exchanges at Komárom had indicated the futility from the Hungarian point of view of obtaining its goals through negotiation with the Czechoslovaks, Kánya began to cast around for alternatives. First he defined for himself more precisely the feasible aims which Hungary could pursue. He gave up the idea of recovering anything of Slovakia except the Hungarian-inhabited borderlands. The common frontier with Poland would have to be achieved through annexation of Subcarpathian Ruthenia alone. Ruthenia was to be obtained through two channels of activity: cooperation with Poland in sending irregular troops to stir up agitation, and Polish mediation to gain Rumanian acquiescence. The Hungarian areas of Slovakia might be had through an appeal for the convening of another Four Power Conference in the sense of the Munich Agreement.

Hungarian and Polish terrorist actions that were aimed at detaching Subcarpathian Ruthenia from Czechoslovakia went on simultaneously with the negotiations at Komárom. Supported by promises from Poland to send in supporting forces after the uprising had started and from Italy to contribute one hundred fighter planes, Hungarian insurrectionist troops began on October 10 to step up their infiltration of Ruthenia.⁵¹

Rumania was very much opposed to these efforts to annex Ruthenia. For one thing, a successful example of Hungarian territorial revision was certain to have an unsettling effect on Transylvania. Furthermore, the Rumanian-Hungarian frontier would be extended. Bucharest also feared that if it supported the idea of a common Polish-Hungarian frontier, the Germans might be antagonized.⁵²

Berlin recognized that the common Polish-Hungarian frontier "would facilitate the formation of an anti-German bloc."⁵³ Beyond this, Ruthenia happened to be important from the point of view of German relations with the

50. *DIMK*, vol. 2, nos. 487b, 488.

51. *Ibid.*, nos. 495, 497, 501, 512, 530; Dreisziger, *Hungary's Way*, p. 96; Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers*, pp. 153-54.

52. *DIMK*, vol. 2, no. 572; Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers*, pp. 160-61.

53. *DGFP D*, vol. 5, no. 45.

Soviet Union. In the fall of 1938 Hitler was toying with the idea of detaching the Ukraine to form a Greater Ukrainian state under German auspices with Ruthenia as a nucleus.⁵⁴ A German commission was even sent to Ruthenia to investigate the possibility of building a highway through it to the East—a scheme with obvious military implications.⁵⁵ According to a memorandum sent by the Foreign Office to the Führer on October 7, an autonomous Ruthenia oriented to Prague was the “most natural solution for the present. It leaves other possibilities open for a later date.”⁵⁶

Beck could do nothing about German opposition to a common frontier, but he did try to mediate between Rumania and Hungary. Polish willingness to mediate with Rumania had been made clear at Beck's meeting with Kánya's *chef de cabinet*, István Csáky, in Warsaw on October 7. There Beck and Csáky agreed that in order to gain Rumanian support for incorporation of Ruthenia into Hungary, they would try to offer Rumania some villages in the eastern part of the area.⁵⁷ On October 19 Beck went to Rumania to exert his personal influence in Hungary's favor. Although he found King Carol II more receptive than the foreign minister, even King Carol was reserved and showed no interest in annexing villages in eastern Ruthenia.⁵⁸

A third dimension of Hungarian policy during this period was an appeal for the convening of a Four Power Conference in hopes of obtaining the ethnic areas of Slovakia. Mussolini supported the idea wholeheartedly.⁵⁹ Britain and France, however, again expressed their basic lack of interest in East Central European affairs by indicating unwillingness to participate. Hitler likewise refused to consider the calling of such a conference.⁶⁰ Such frustration of their plans led the Hungarians to request German-Italian arbitration, although Ciano warned that this would mean the end of hopes of annexing Ruthenia; the Reich was so opposed to a common border, there would be no point in Italy's advocating it at the arbitration.⁶¹ To balance German influence, Budapest proposed including Poland as an arbitral power.⁶²

Berlin effectively squelched the inclusion of Poland among the arbitral

54. *Ibid.*, Gyula Juhász, *Magyarország külpolitikája, 1919–1945* (Budapest, 1969), pp. 185–86; Elizabeth Wiskemann, *The Rome-Berlin Axis* (London and New York, 1949), pp. 131–32.

55. *DIMK*, vol. 3: Magda Ádám, ed., *Magyarország külpolitikája, 1938–1939* (Budapest, 1970), no. 228.

56. *DGFP D*, vol. 4, no. 45.

57. Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers*, p. 153.

58. *Ibid.*, pp. 160–61; Batowski, “Voyage de Joseph Beck,” pp. 137–60.

59. *DIMK*, vol. 2, nos. 529, 533.

60. *Ibid.*, nos. 533, 575, 597; *DGFP D*, vol. 4, nos. 61, 62; Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers*, pp. 158–59.

61. *DIMK*, vol. 2, no. 551.

62. Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers*, p. 161; Dreisziger, *Hungary's Way*, p. 97.

powers by linking this with demands for Polish concessions to Germany in the Free City of Danzig and in the Polish "Corridor." On October 24 Ribbentrop met with the Polish ambassador in Berlin, Józef Lipski, and told him that the questions of a Hungarian-Polish frontier and of Polish participation in arbitrating the Hungarian-Czechoslovak dispute should be linked with a general settlement of German-Polish problems. Such a settlement would include cession of Danzig to Germany and the granting of an extraterritorial highway to Germany across the "Corridor." At this point Lipski changed the subject and dropped the idea of Polish participation as an arbitral power.⁶³

Germany and Italy agreed to the arbitration on October 30, provided that Hungary and Czechoslovakia would treat the award as final.⁶⁴ Both countries accepted this condition, although the Hungarians retained vital unexpressed qualifications. On the same day Kánya instructed the minister in Rome to inform Ciano that Hungary would not bring up the Ruthenian question at the arbitration, but that efforts to annex Ruthenia nevertheless would continue.⁶⁵

The foreign ministers of Germany and Italy met in Vienna on November 2 to make the territorial changes. According to the Vienna Award, Hungary received a strip of land in southern Slovakia and Ruthenia which corresponded roughly to the Hungarian ethnic areas. Hungary was to occupy the ceded territory between November 3 and 10.⁶⁶ The arbitration thus fulfilled one of the Hungarian aims: the recovery of districts with a Hungarian majority. Cession of the southern area of Ruthenia now provided a base from which to carry on activities aimed at annexation of the entire area. Obstacles, however, also were created by the award. The power and prestige of the Axis were behind the settlement, and the Hungarian government had openly promised to accept the results of arbitration as final. Any further attempts to annex Ruthenia would have to take into account these new aspects of the situation.

After the Vienna Award, the tactics adopted by the Hungarian government in regard to Ruthenia were modeled rather closely on those Hitler had used to make Czechoslovakia an international issue. The aim was to demonstrate the unviable nature of the rest of Ruthenia, which was done by sending in Polish and Hungarian agitators to cooperate with pro-Hungarian factions to encourage local confusion and dissatisfaction. When the situation became chaotic enough, troops would be sent in to "restore order."⁶⁷

Budapest and Warsaw worked out definite plans for occupation of the

63. Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers*, pp. 162–63; *DGFP D*, vol. 5, no. 81.

64. *DIMK*, vol. 2, no. 616.

65. *Ibid.*, no. 614.

66. Text of the Vienna Award is in *DIMK*, vol. 2, nos. 621, 622; and *DGFP D*, vol. 4, no. 99.

67. *DIMK*, vol. 3, nos. 12, 38; *DGFP D*, vol. 4, no. 118.

rest of Ruthenia by regular army troops after the preliminary propaganda and agitation had time to take effect.⁶⁸ Yet on the eve of the planned invasion, the Hungarian government wavered. Was it really in a position to present Hitler with a *fait accompli*? German troops on the Austrian border were only a few miles from Budapest. Poland was certainly no match for the Reich militarily. Neither was Italy, for that matter, even in the unlikely event that Mussolini should decide to support Hungary and defy Hitler. In all the talk about the Third Europe, it had been assumed that the bloc could be formed without antagonizing Germany. Certainly no aid could be expected from Yugoslavia and Rumania, who were afraid both of Hitler and of Hungarian revisionist demands on their own territory. Hungary was obviously in an utterly vulnerable position, and sought through maneuver to avoid direct confrontation.

The decision was to make inquiries concerning the German attitude to the proposed invasion of Ruthenia. On November 17 Kánya informed Berlin that the situation in Ruthenia was becoming daily more chaotic, and that Hungary was being besieged by requests to march in and annex the area.⁶⁹ Clearly negative in spirit, the reply was vague enough to allow some latitude in interpretation: "If Hungarian action gave rise to difficulties, Germany could not support Hungary," and the German government therefore considered the planned action "inopportune."⁷⁰ At a meeting of the Hungarian cabinet on the evening of November 18 the German reply was taken to mean that the Reich would not support Hungary if it got into difficulties in Ruthenia, but that it would not actively oppose Hungarian plans.⁷¹ It was this version of the German attitude which was reported to Mussolini. He had indicated earlier that day that Italy would have to join the Reich in protest if Germany objected to Hungarian annexation of Ruthenia. On November 19 the Hungarian military attaché in Rome assured the Duce that Hitler did not object to Hungarian plans to invade Ruthenia, and Mussolini then agreed to send the fighter planes he had promised in October.⁷² The Hungarians had come perilously close to misrepresentation of the German attitude, and their doubts were expressed by postponing the invasion until November 21. When Berlin's real views became known, Mussolini bitterly reproached the Hungarians for

68. *DIMK*, vol. 3, no. 33; Report on the situation in Subcarpathian Ruthenia to the Reichsführer SS, Berlin, Nov. 22, 1938, GD, 1319/D499186-188. For the events surrounding plans to attack Subcarpathian Ruthenia, see also the accounts by Dreisziger, *Hungary's Way*, pp. 97-99; Macartney, *October Fifteenth*, 1:311-14; and Aladár Kis, *Magyarország külpolitikája a második világháború előestéjén* (Budapest, 1963), pp. 33-43.

69. *DIMK*, vol. 3, no. 38.

70. *DGFP D*, vol. 4, no. 122.

71. Kis, *Magyarország külpolitikája*, p. 36.

72. *DIMK*, vol. 3, no. 51; *Ciano's Diary*, Nov. 20, 1938.

trying to mislead him.⁷³ Ciano also was outraged at what he considered Hungarian duplicity.⁷⁴ Immediately canceling orders to send the airplanes Mussolini had promised, Italy joined Germany in a strongly worded *démarche* on November 21.⁷⁵ Budapest backed down, as it had to, and called off plans for the invasion.

The Hungarian decision not to carry out plans to invade Subcarpathian Ruthenia marked the end of hopes to form a Third Europe. Kánya's resignation as a consequence of the incident was symbolic of the failure of the "free-hand" policy, which had emphasized the dangers of too close relations with Germany. After November 1938 the Radical Right, which had maintained all along that revision could only be achieved through collaboration with the Reich, began to exert more influence in foreign as well as domestic affairs. This is not, of course, to say that suddenly Hungary committed itself to a German orientation. It is nevertheless true that in the months after the Ruthenian fiasco Hungary took important steps toward placing itself firmly on the side of the Axis: it signed the Anticomintern Pact, and promised Germany and Italy to withdraw from the League of Nations. Concessions were made to the pro-Nazi wing of the German minority, and Imrédy introduced new anti-Jewish legislation in December 1938.

The Third Europe failed to materialize for a number of reasons. German opposition was one of the most important. It was, perhaps, an illusion in the first place to have believed that the Reich in 1938 would have allowed the formation of a potentially anti-German bloc in the East. If attempts to form such a group had been made earlier, while Germany was still relatively weak, they might have had more chance of success. But the failure was due not only to outside pressure. Internal contradictions also were involved. The major weakness in this regard was the emphasis on the common border with Poland, which linked realization of the Third Europe with the cause of Hungarian revisionism in Czechoslovakia. One can, of course, understand Hungarian revisionist policy. It would not be realistic to expect a people to accept without resentment the loss of two-thirds of their historic state. Yet one may still question the wisdom of pursuing revisionism to the exclusion of other considerations. Two potential members of the Third Europe were, after all, allies of Czechoslovakia. They also had obtained territory from Hungary after the war, and feared revision. Budapest's emphasis on recovering former Hungarian areas of Czechoslovakia did nothing to allay their

73. Notes on telephone conversation with Italian Ambassador Attolico, Berlin, Nov. 21, 1938, GD, 1319/D499180.

74. *Ciano's Diary*, Nov. 20, 1938.

75. *Ibid.*; texts of the German and Italian Notes are in *DIMK*, vol. 3, nos. 58, 59.

suspensions or to mitigate national antagonisms left over from the days of the Dual Monarchy.

The countries of East Central Europe have often been criticized by Western writers for their failure to establish a system of international cooperation, and certainly one must agree that it would have been to the benefit of all if such cooperation had been achieved. However, no other European states did much better in the interwar years. Almost every country made compromises with the Third Reich at the expense of some other state or states. The result was that one by one many of them came under German control. Seeking its own survival, each nation contributed to its own destruction.