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## The Evolution of Hungarian Geopolitics in the Years 1920–1945

### Abstract

The signing of the Treaty of Trianon in June 1920 was a turning point in the geopolitics of the Hungarian state. Before the war, this geopolitical situation was also somewhat illusory, given that Hungary had only limited sovereignty, being part of the dualistic structure of the Danube Monarchy until October 1918. Following the year 1920, the political landscape of Hungary was characterized by a significant reorganization of its territorial boundaries. The achievement of these goals was complicated by the necessity for Hungary to first break out of international isolation and then find allies. In domestic politics, Budapest was compelled to implement decisive socio-political reforms, as the country's participation on the international stage was contingent upon these reforms (referred to as internal revision).

**Keywords:** Hungary, geopolitics, Horthy, revisionism

The genesis of Hungarian geopolitics can be traced back to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At that time, the science functioned as a humble sister to the geographical sciences. These in turn developed in response to similar phenomena in Germany, which were influenced by the work of the German scholar Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1902)<sup>1</sup>. Anthropological research (including linguistic expeditions to Asia) and political geography developed mainly in Hungary. The country's first department chair of geography was established at the University in Pest in 1870, headed by János Hunfalvy. Additionally, Hunfalvy played a pivotal role in the establishment of the Hungarian Geographical Society in 1872. The achievements of Géza Czirbusz, on the other hand, were a series of works on the geography, ethnography, and economy of the Carpathian Basin<sup>2</sup>. The work of Czirbusz and other

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<sup>1</sup> Z. Hajdú, *Friedrich Ratzel hatása a magyar földrajztudományban*, "Tér és Társadalom" 1998, No. 3, pp. 95–99.

<sup>2</sup> P. Teleki, *A földrajzi gondolat története*. Essay. Budapest 1917; Géza Czirbusz, *Nemzetek alakulása anthropo-geografiai szempontból*, Nagybecskerek 1910; Géza Czirbusz, *Az ember geografiája. Az anthropo-geografia II. Része*, Budapest 1917.



geographers was later used by the Hungarian *raison d'état* during the Versailles negotiations to argue the impossibility of breaking the historical unity of the Hungarian Crown<sup>3</sup>. It was also at this time (1910) that Pál Teleki drew up the *Carte Rouge*, a map of the ethnic structure of Hungary, which was used as evidence at the Versailles Conference in 1920. The first work that actually dealt with geopolitics appeared at a very turbulent time: after the defeat in the war, but before the humiliating Treaty of Trianon (Géza Czirbusz, *Geopolitika. Az anthropológiáról III. része*, Budapest 1919). Many academic forums emphasized the unity of the state. Hungarian geographers of the inter-war period explicitly used historical arguments to justify the need to preserve pre-war Hungary as a whole. Jenő Cholnoky president of the Hungarian Geographical Society from 1914 to the end of the Second World War, described Greater Hungary as “Something that has belonged to us for a thousand years and which, according to the laws of nature, will unconditionally belong to us again”<sup>4</sup>.

In the 1920s and early 1930s, the idea of the Carpathian Basin (Hungarian: *Kárpát-medence*) began to develop, especially in geography. Even a map atlas for young people from 1930 showed a map of the so-called Greater Hungary on the cover<sup>5</sup>. The use of the term gradually extended beyond geography to sociographic literature. The term also made a comeback in the early 1980s in studies that historically analyzed the work of inter-war Hungarian geographers. At the end of the Second World War, András Rónai – a student of Teleki – published an atlas of Central Europe, with maps showing the borders of the countries between 1000 and 1920. The choice of period was not accidental: the first year coincided with the establishment of the Hungarian state, and the second with the disintegration of its historical territory<sup>6</sup>.

The Hungarian nationalist elite constructed its own vision of a “Hungarian Empire” (*magyar birodalom*)<sup>7</sup> to demonstrate the strength of the nation, the unity of the Crown of St Stephen as a political organism with a thousand-year history, in contrast to the Austrian part of the dualist state, which was the result of centuries of annexation and partition wars. The tradition of a “Hungarian Empire”, however, dates back to the 1860s. It was then that József Tabódy and Károly Szini put forward the idea of reviving the Habsburg Empire by

<sup>3</sup> L. Lóczy, *A Magyar Szent Korona Országainak földrajzi, társadalomtudományi, közművelődési és közgazdasági leírása*, Budapest 1918.

<sup>4</sup> J. Cholnoky, *A Föld és élete*, Vol. 6, Budapest 1937, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> K. Kogutowicz, *Dr. Kogutowicz Károly polgári iskolai atlasza*, Budapest 1930.

<sup>6</sup> A. Rónai, *Közép-Európa atlasz*, Budapest-Balatonfüred 1945.

<sup>7</sup> The term “empire”, “birodalom” in Hungarian, was not commonly used in the study of state and law in Hungary until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, empire was associated with the emperor. As late as 1893, the Great Encyclopedia of Pallas defined an empire as a state headed by an emperor. In 1910, the conservative lawyer and feature writer Mihály Réz employed the term “empire” exclusively as a synonym for Austria. He also denounced any form of domination of Hungary by the “Habsburg empire”, which, in his opinion, entailed the weakening of Hungarian law and the constitution for the sake of a centralized state. Gradually, however, the term “empire” entered the legal sciences in Hungary. The term was associated with the former state created by St. Stephen and referred to all lands in eastern and south-eastern Europe that had been under Hungarian sovereignty for a considerable period of time during the Middle Ages. These included territories such as Dalmatia, Bosnia, Serbia, Bulgaria, parts of Galicia, Wallachia, and even Moldavia. For Hungarian liberals, the term “empire” referred to the unity of all lands that were under the authority of the crown of St. Stephen. Transylvania, which had a separate status as a province, was to be aligned with the status of other Hungarian lands. In the period preceding 1848, Kossuth posited that the empire should be conceived of as a linguistically unified province, stating that “...One empire can have only one main administrative language, and that in the Hungarian empire, this language would be Hungarian”. *Pesti Hírlap*, 19 June 1842.

moving its political centre to Hungary, the largest and geographically central province of the Austrian state. In 1881, the journalist János Vajda argued that the decadent Germans should be deprived of their leading role in the Habsburg monarchy in favor of the young at heart, resilient and ambitious Hungarians. Another Hungarian journalist argued in 1908 for a Hungarian-Slavic alliance against Pan-Germanism<sup>8</sup>. In the opinion of much of the Hungarian elite, the Germans were unfit to lead a great state because they belonged to a declining race, while the Slavs were “unreliable” and could not perform such important functions in a dual state. All these visions were verified by the Treaty of Trianon, which ended the First World War.

In 2020, it will be one hundred years since Hungary signed the Treaty of Trianon, which changed the geopolitics of the country forever. Moreover, the treaty has made the foreign policy of the government in Budapest incomprehensible and unpredictable (even today – the current alliance with Putin’s Russia and Erdoğan’s Turkey). This text is an attempt at an analysis of the transformation of Hungarian politics after 1920, which was the time of the most painful changes in the country. We will try to answer the question whether elements of the “imperial” thinking of the Hungarian elite remain in the political discourse, and what proposals for change have been put forward by intellectuals and the opposition. The “Trianon Syndrome” – as the consequences of the Treaty were described years later on the social, political, systemic, economic and cultural levels – had an impact on many aspects of the social and political life of the Kingdom of Hungary.

After the dissolution of historical Hungary, geographical science and political geography continued to be strongly influenced by Friedrich Ratzel. In Szeged, a special research department was established at the university after 1920, in which F. Fodor, the teacher from Karánsebes, stood out. After the war he took up serious research work, especially on the economy of the Balkans and Hungary. It was the work of Ferenc Fodor (also at the Eastern Institute, which operated until 1931) that initiated the political rapprochement between Hungary and Yugoslavia in the late 1920s and then in the 1930s<sup>9</sup>.

An invaluable contribution to the conceptualization of the fundamental tenets of Hungarian geopolitics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was made by Oszkár Jászi. At the beginning of his career he was a sociologist, then in 1914 he was one of the founders of the Radical Party, and in 1918 he was appointed minister without portfolio in charge of minority affairs in the area of historical Hungary. He outlined the principles for the establishment of the federation that was to be constituted on the ruins of the Habsburg state. The federation was to encompass the entire territory of the former monarchy – divided into five new states (the so-called pentarchy), it was to be an entirely new political entity. Jászi’s conclusion was that the most difficult problems to solve would be those of the South Slavs, Poles, and Czechs. The “Polish part” of this federation was to consist of Galicia combined with part of the Kingdom of Poland (Congress Kingdom) and the eastern lands liberated from Russian rule by the armies of the Central Powers<sup>10</sup>. This was also the weakness of Jászi’s concept. For he saw no need to unite the Polish lands under German rule, with the rest of

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<sup>8</sup> B. Varga, *The Two Faces of the Hungarian Empire*, “Austrian History Yearbook” 2021, vol. 52, p. 124.

<sup>9</sup> F. Fodor, *A magyar-jugoszláv közeledés gazdaságföldrajzi alapjai*, “Katolikus Szemle” 1937, no. 3, pp. 139–151.

<sup>10</sup> O. Jászi, *A Monarchia jövője. A dualizmus bukása és Dunai Egyesült Államok*, Budapest 1918.

the Polish lands remaining in the Central European federation. Jászi also noted that in the “Polish part” of the federation, a national conflict between Poles and Ukrainians could arise in the future. This was an obvious observation, but this politician did not see, or did not want to see, that the same aspirations of the Ukrainians could be shared by Romanians and Slovaks in a Hungarian state.

The whole federation was to be called – as already indicated – the Pentarchy. This state was supposed to take over some functions of F. Naumann’s *Mittleuropa*. One of these, and perhaps the most important, was to be the role of means of conveying of Western culture towards the Balkans and Southern Europe. The union was to be based on the “solidarity of interests” of the peoples living in the area of historical Hungary, not on loose “feudal alliances”. The culmination of this solidarity of peoples (nations) was to be a federation, but a federation that would not allow itself to be “dragged” into wars with nationalist motives. An example of the most prosperous federation at the time was Switzerland, which, despite the duration of the world war, did not get involved on either side. One would like to say that when other countries were fighting each other, Switzerland remained in peace, like Saint Ambrose among the wild beasts<sup>11</sup>. The plans for Central Europe drawn up in Hungary after 1918 were a kind of emanation of the *Mittleuropa* of 1915. Firstly, the cooperation of the states in the region was necessary mainly for economic reasons. The new union had to be established without German domination.

Moreover, the isolationism of the individual nations of the Danubian Plain was to come to an end. Jászi even considered setting up a special international arbitration in the area to resolve disputes<sup>12</sup>. This idea was particularly close to contemporary attempts at the internationalization of ethnic issues. Therefore, the Pentarchy’s plan for the federalization of the Habsburg Monarchy envisaged the separation of four territorial units from Cisilawia, while Hungary was to remain a separate, undivided state. Unlike the eastern part of the Habsburg Monarchy, the western part (Cisilawia) was to be divided into four parts (Bohemia, Poland, Illyria, Austria). In this concept, Hungary, treated as a territorial unit, could continue to play a leading role in Central Europe because of its dominant role in the region’s economy, politics, and culture. The Pentarchy Plan was, in a sense, a response to the political vacuum created by the collapse of Imperial Germany and Austria-Hungary. József Csetényi’s views were similar to Jászi’s, but he returned to the elements of Hungarian rule in the Carpathian Basin, arguing that only such a state led by the Magyars could compensate for the lack of a strong Germany and save the region from chaos<sup>13</sup>.

Jászi saw no separatist or irredentist tendencies in the planned federation (Pentarchy). He refused to consider that Transylvania or southern Hungary might become annexed to Serbia and Romania. Jászi believed that the role of separatist tendencies would be reduced to a minimum if free movement of goods and a “single customs territory” were introduced within the federation of the Central European Union. A utopian claim in Jászi’s conception was the view that once the economic unity of the Central European nations had been achieved, it would not be the less developed states (Serbia, Romania) that would have the

<sup>11</sup> U. Altermann, *Svájc – az európai modell?*, “Regio” 1994, vol. 2, pp. 19, 20.

<sup>12</sup> Gy. Vargyai, *Nemzetiségi kérdés és integráció. Adalékok Jászi Oszkár nemzetiségi koncepciójának értékeléséhez*, Pécs 1970, pp. 16–18.

<sup>13</sup> J. Csetényi, *Revízió és közgazdaság*, in: *Helyünk Európában*, ed. by E. Ring, vol. I, Budapest 1986, pp. 151–154.

power of attraction, but the provinces of the Hungarian state (Transylvania, Croatia) with a higher degree of civilizational development. The Hungarian radical went on to argue that the economic community would have the effect of “blunting the edge” of nationalisms and territorial separatisms, thus contributing to the crystallization of unity in the political sense.

A crucial point in Jászi’s concept of federation was his rejection of the need to divide historic Hungary into national members<sup>14</sup>. He saw such a need in the case of Cislitawia and divided it into four countries: Austria, the Czech Republic, Illyria (South Slavic provinces that belonged to Austria and Hungary before the war) and Poland. The fifth component of the federation was supposed to be Hungary, reduced only by Croatia, which was supposed to become incorporated into the new Yugoslav state. Jászi believed that Hungary should be preserved as a historical unit in its entirety. Unity in the geographical sense, a thousand years of political history and economic ties between the provinces proved to be the main arguments for preserving the Holy Crown of Hungary as a whole. Unlike Hungary, Austria had to be divided into four states because the previous 17 crown states did not sufficiently secure the political, economic and cultural interests of the historical nations living there. To analyze the grounds for this reasoning, one would have to go back to the period before the outbreak of the First World War, when Jászi distinguished between “nations” and “nationalities” among the peoples living in the Monarchy. Such a view characterized his philosophy of the nation until the end of the war and became the cause of ideological disputes with Karl Renner, as will be discussed in the second part of this chapter. On the other hand, the conviction that Hungary has a unique role to play in Central Europe has had a strong influence. Jászi attached great importance to the “German example” of building a unified state, arguing that the entire unification process should be led by the strongest state in the entire union. It was Hungary, by virtue of its geographical location, economic opportunities and historical experience, that was to play the role of the “central” state in the whole Danubian Federation. Just as Prussia had done in the German Union, Hungary was to take on the role in the proposed Danubian Federation of initiating the necessary reforms to develop the spiritual and economic strength of the entire union<sup>15</sup>. It is true that despite high economic growth during the dualist Monarchy, Hungary was in crisis at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (probably due to the tariff war with Serbia). The salvation of some of Hungary’s political and economic clubs could have been a war for which Hungary was not prepared. In 1913, Hungary’s GDP was 69% of the European average, 37% of that of England and about 50% of that of Imperial Germany<sup>16</sup>.

Jászi was adamant that the small nations of Central Europe had no chance of an independent political existence and the preservation of their independence. In early 1918, in his book *A Monarchia jövője*, Jászi pondered on the question of what kind of regime would provide Hungary with the greatest security and also best enhance its existing position in Central Europe. Over time, he came to believe that the Central European nations could not be safe on their own. Only together, with combined forces, would the peoples of the Balkans and the Monarchy be able to guarantee “...the free development of culture between the

<sup>14</sup> The need for a thorough reform of the dualist system has been recognised even among politicians of the right, far from radicalism: Gy. Andrassy, *Diplomácia és világháború*, Budapest 1990, p. 164.

<sup>15</sup> O. Jászi, *A Monarchia jövője. A dualizmus bukása és Dunai Egyesült Államok*, Budapest 1918, p. 82.

<sup>16</sup> I. Romsics, *Hungarian Society and Social Conflict Before and After Trianon*, “Hungarian Studies” 1998–99, no. 1, pp. 47–49.

Russian and German millstones”<sup>17</sup>. Apart from Jászi, other Hungarian intellectuals also emphasized the element of encirclement of the small nations of Central Europe by the Great Powers. Dezső Szabó, a native of Transylvania, argued that they had to form a Danubian Federation because they were surrounded by Germans and Slavs<sup>18</sup>. In this particular case, Szabó was writing about Romanian-Hungarian cooperation in the face of the German-Slavic neighbourhood, but as early as 1935 he had published a treatise entitled *Magayrország helye Európában: Kelet-Európa*<sup>19</sup>.

According to Szabó, “Bolshevik nationalism” threatened Central Europe, but it should find enough strength to create a local federation. Central Europe, he argued, was the site of clashes between Western European Christianity and the Ottoman armies, and these battles, a shared history, “led to a common basis of spiritual bonding”. Characteristic of the region, according to Szabó, was the emergence of a “Jewish middle class”, economic backwardness and political dependence on stronger neighbours.

At the beginning of the war, Jászi was sympathetic to Naumann’s idea of *Mitteleuropa*. Economic factors also seemed to favor the idea of *Mitteleuropa*. Jászi, citing the views of Rudolf Goldscheid, argued that the end of European hegemony was at hand. Outside of Europe, large markets have emerged which are comparable in size to Europe and which threaten its position. The loss of hegemony did not mean that the achievements of the previous generations had been lost. With the decline of Europe’s political importance, Jászi looked forward to the hope of unfettered economic and political development<sup>20</sup>. A prelude to considering the concept of *Mitteleuropa*, however, can be found in a discussion that began in the pages of “Húszadik Század” and “Világ”, the leading journals of the progressive intelligentsia, regarding a customs union. In this context, Jászi argued with Hugo Veigelsberg (Ignotus) and another radical, Pál Szende, about the future of the Central European region<sup>21</sup>. The former rejoiced almost uncritically in the achievements of the German workers and claimed that in the Second Reich there would be no difference between the Kaiser and the workers in social matters. They (Ignotus and Szende) agreed on the future of the Danubian Plain after the possible defeat of Germany, which would be followed by the atomization of the area based on the principle of nationality. There was also agreement on the problem of Hungarian independence, which was judged to be utopian, not because the Magyars did not want independence, but because of their neighbours, given the imperialism of the Balkan peoples and the conflicting interests of Germany and Russia<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> O. Jászi, *A Monarchia jövője. A dualizmus bukása és a Dunai Egyesült Államok*, Budapest 1918, pp. 76, 77.

<sup>18</sup> G. Péterfi, *Dezso Szabó és a nemzetiségi kérdés*, “Limes, Tudományos Szemle, Tatabánya” 2010, no. 2, p. 48.

<sup>19</sup> G. Péterfi, *Dezso Szabó...*, p. 49.

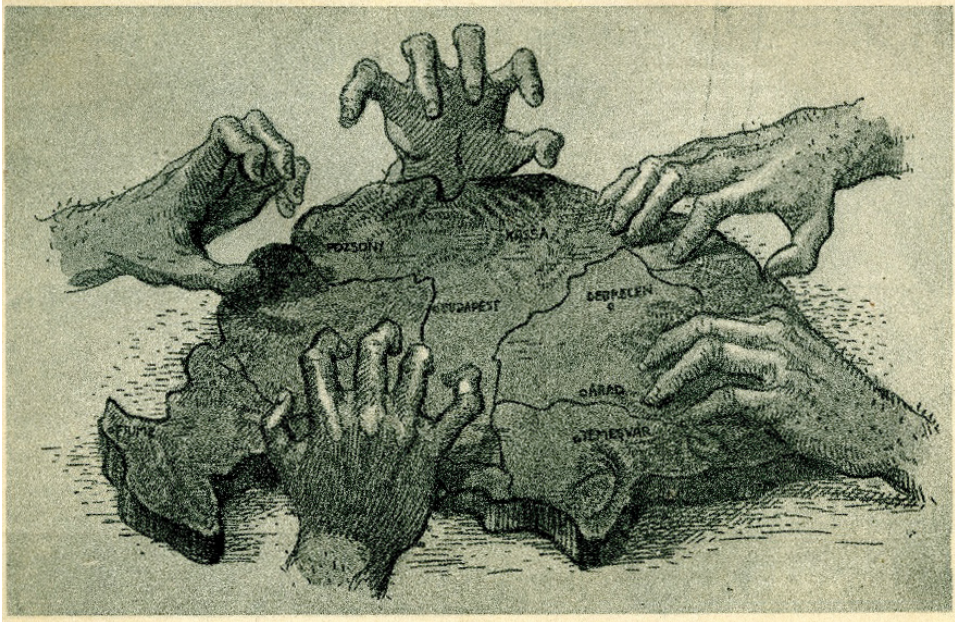
<sup>20</sup> O. Jászi, *A Monarchia jövője...*

<sup>21</sup> Hungary was only culturally and civilizationally linked to Western Europe, as the connections of the Hungarian intelligentsia with the elites of France and Great Britain can attest (e.g. István Széchenyi and his trip to Great Britain during the referendum period in Hungary in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century). In reality, from the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Hungary was part of a large economic and linguistic area, which was generally referred to as *Mitteleuropa* – that is, a large area in Central Europe dominated politically and economically by Germany and Austria, and the language of this area was German (e.g. in the army, diplomacy, and economy). G.D. Kecskés, *Les relations entre la France et l’Europe centrale et orientale des années 1860 à nos jours*, Budapest 2009, pp. 39–43.

<sup>22</sup> Ignotus [Hugo Veigelsberg], *Még egyszer Mitteleuropa*, “Világ”, 20 I 1916.

Although Hungary was interested in the Balkans, it did not play a major role there after 1918, firstly because Germany, which was playing an increasingly important role in this part of Europe, “gambled” on Belgrade and Bucharest, and secondly because the Little Entente isolated Hungary politically and diplomatically.

**Figure 1.** Disintegration of the historical Hungarian state (propaganda poster).



Source: Burial of Hungary – Treaty of Trianon and PAN archive materials (<https://archiwum.pan.pl>).

From the end of the First World War, there was a strong tendency in Transylvania to turn Transylvania into an autonomous province. Transylvania had autonomy until 1867, but this was abolished by the Hungarian liberals when a dualist state was formed in which there was to be no room for feudal remnants of territorial separation. At the time of the Versailles negotiations, there was even an idea that Transylvania should remain a separate state<sup>23</sup>, but there was no agreement on such settling the matter. In the 1920s, both Transylvanian Hungarians and Romanians put forward a plan for cultural autonomy in Transylvania, or regional autonomy, known as “Transylvaniam”. Several plans for the internal reconstruction of Transylvania emerged in the inter-war period, but their common denominator was the establishment of an independent Transylvanian state or its transformation into a kind of autonomous country within Romania. In both cases, provincial power would be held by all three nations and exercised similar to Switzerland (division of the country into national cantons). The functioning of a possible Transylvanian state, even

<sup>23</sup> This was the plan of the prime minister, István Bethlen. Further information on this subject: I. Bethlen, *Válogatott politikai írások és beszédek*, ed. I. Romsics, Budapest 2000, pp. 289–315.

in Hungary, was considered an important element in stabilizing relations between Romania and Hungary<sup>24</sup>.

In the inter-war period, the geopolitical visions of Hungary's presence in Central Europe were largely based on theories of the revision of the borders. Some of these visions referred to concepts from the time of the dualistic monarchy. At that time, some representatives of political clubs were putting forward theories of Magyar domination in Central Europe and even of an expansion into the Balkans. Publicists from nationalist circles not only opposed the democratization of the country, but on the contrary argued that democracy could not work under the current conditions because it would further exacerbate national antagonisms. According to Mihály Réza, this could only be achieved in a nationally unified state. Another nationalist, Jenő Rákosi, claimed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: "We do not need more than 30 million Hungarians now, and all of Eastern Europe will be ours"<sup>25</sup>.

In the 1920s, there was a degree of revival of these ideas in the views of László Ottlik. This politician held many positions in the Hungarian government and was a member of the Hungarian delegation at the Versailles Conference. He reconstructed the concept of the "idea of the St Stephen's State". In his opinion, the Hungarians should also have control over the territories inhabited by non-Hungarians and part of historical Hungary before 1920. Moreover, in such a state, Hungarians should play the role of *primus inter pares*. In his published works, Ottlik presented an analysis of the situation of the Hungarian minority in Central Europe. He offered a critique of the position of the Slovaks in relation to the Czechs during the inter-war period. He even claimed that Hungary could offer the Slovaks' autonomy within its own state, thus freeing the Slovaks from their dependence on Prague, which he described as colonial<sup>26</sup>. The Croatian position was similarly assessed. After 1918, they were unable to realize their political ambitions within the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (SHS), which became increasingly dependent on Belgrade and at the mercy of Greater Serbia. He assumed that within the Hungarian state, which would become a federal state, there would be two official languages in the non-Hungarian areas: Hungarian and the local (indigenous) language. All the regions of the former, historical Hungary that were seceded after 1920 would be granted extensive territorial and political autonomy upon reintegration into Hungary. In Transylvania, which after 1918 incorporated Romania, Ottlik assumed the extension of political rights also to Romanians. Thus, in Transylvania, there would have been a union of four (not three, as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) nations, going back to the traditions of the late Middle Ages<sup>27</sup>. However, it was a relatively strange assumption in the twentieth century to speak of feudal assumptions about the granting of political rights.

<sup>24</sup> P. Balogh, *Transylvaniam: Revision or Regionalism?*, in: *Geopolitics in the Danube Region: Hungarian Reconciliation Efforts, 1848–1998*, ed. I. Romsics, B.K. Király, Budapest 1999, pp. 245–249.

<sup>25</sup> Z. Horváth, *Magyar századforduló*, Budapest 1961, p. 59.

<sup>26</sup> L. Ottlik, *Magyar nemzet – cseh birodalom*, "Magyar Szemle", February 1928, pp. 112–121.

<sup>27</sup> The Romanians as a nation were not counted as a *unio trium nationum* (this principle was established in 1437), and relatively early for the realities of Central Europe, they began their efforts for national emancipation. As early as 1791 and 1792, during the Transylvanian Diet, they submitted a "humble memorandum" (*Supplex Libellus Valachorum*) to Emperor Leopold II, asking him to grant equal rights to all the states and peoples of Transylvania. On the union of the three nations in Transylvania: P.F. Sugar, *Southeastern Europe under Ottoman Rule, 1354–1804*, Seattle 1978, pp. 146–150.



Ottlik believed that only the restoration of the State of St Stephen could cure the ills of the peoples of Central Europe. In his view, the dismantling of the previous political-mental unity in this part of Europe has created its own problems: the oppression of national minorities, the creation of “artificial” nations that did not exist before. In the summer of 1928 he wrote an article entitled *Új Hungária felé* (Towards a New Hungary). It sparked a wide debate both at home and abroad. There he drew plans for the reconstruction of a multi-ethnic, historical Hungary. The ideas put forward by László Ottlik also found a ready audience in the form of so-called neo-nationalism, an ideology created in government circles that assumed a future (perhaps not political, but certainly civilizational) supremacy of the Hungarian nation in Central Europe.

Ottlik deliberately used the word *Hungaria* rather than *Magyarország* in the title. In doing so, he evoked the historical idea of Hungary as a multiethnic and multicultural political community, formed over the course of its thousand-year history, where membership was based not on language but on historical experience. Over time, the concept of *natio Hungarica* evolved to include Croats, Slovaks, and Ruthenians (but not Romanians). The article *Új Hungária felé* left no room for illusions: the Hungarians were to be the nation with greater decision-making powers in the planned *Hungaria*. Naturally, the constituent nations of this federated state were to be granted autonomy. Ottlik’s concept is sometimes compared to the program for the reconstruction of Hungary put forward by the sociologist and politician Oszkár Jászi. His program to turn Hungary into a federation in which each nationality would be given a canton in which it would be in the majority has even been described as a plan to turn Hungary into an Eastern Switzerland (*keleti Svájc*)<sup>28</sup>. When László Ottlik referred to federalist ideas, this was an obvious reference to Jászi’s views. Officially, however, there was no acknowledgement of ideological links with Jászi, who was considered guilty of the historical disintegration of the state, and his name was virtually forgotten in Hungary after 1920 and only recognized in exile (he taught political science at Oberlin College in Ohio, USA). It was not until the 1980s and beyond that Jászi’s views experienced a real renaissance.

Going back to László Ottlik’s ideas, in 1929 he published an article in “Magyar Szemle” entitled *Új Hungária és Keleti Svájc* (New Hungary and Eastern Switzerland)<sup>29</sup>. However, the idea of a *Pax Hungarica* was a very important element in L. Ottlik’s article under discussion and in subsequent articles. The author used the term *Pax Hungarica* to define the political order and opportunities for development enjoyed by non-Hungarian nationalities in the Holy Crown of Hungary (also known as the Crown of Saint Stephen) from the Middle Ages until the emergence of modern nationalist movements. Ottlik even argued that Hungarian nationalism at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was not characteristic of society as a whole, but of the politicians of the time, such as István Tisza. Tisza declared Hungary to be a country threatened by the nationalist movements of the Slavic peoples.

Ottlik argued that the idea of a *Pax Hungarica* was altered by the chauvinist views of a handful of Hungarian politicians, as well as by contact with the imperial and partitionist policies of the Habsburgs. After Ottlik came a new generation of politicians who believed that the temporary loss of Hungary’s leading role in Central Europe was recoverable. Politicians of the inter-war period referred to the defense of the Hungarian minority in their

<sup>28</sup> O. Jászi, *Magyarország jövője és a Dunai Egyesült Államok*, Budapest 1918.

<sup>29</sup> L. Ottlik, *Új Hungária és Keleti Svájc*, “Magyar Szemle”, October 1929, p. 114.

concepts, but did not rely on ethnic considerations when constructing geopolitical concepts. Instead, they spoke of the “Hungarian habitat” as a unity formed over many centuries, not by ethnic “separation” but by long political and social processes<sup>30</sup>.

Finally, the ideology of Hungarian superiority among other elements of the federation influenced the formation of the fascist views of the so-called Hungarist Movement. Szálasi also referred to the idea of a *Pax Hungarica* in his views. He even spoke of a family of Carpathian nations. He envisaged the creation of the United Hungarian Lands, consisting of six provinces: Hungary, Transylvania, Slovakia, Transcarpathian Ruthenia, Croatia, and the Western Marches (lands near the border with Austria). Szálasi made no secret of the fact that Hungary, in the center of the state and the largest in terms of territory, would be the de facto political and administrative center of the state. This role would be effectively taken away from the other five parts of the state, lying on the edge of its borders<sup>31</sup>.

The Hungarian fascists constructed the political and economic space of the region using terminology similar to that of the German Nazis. The Hungarian fascists also condemned liberal ideology and tried to create a community of nations (*népközösség*) in Central Europe. Ferenc Szálasi’s vision of Europe was of a union with homogeneous civilizational and cultural foundations. Within this “great space”, however, he envisaged space for smaller communities, including a revived “Greater Hungaria”, which would be the result of the efforts of the Hungarist Movement. He also counted large parts of North Africa as part of Europe’s living space. Szálasi saw a leading role for Hungary in the South-East European territories in the fascist system. He argued that only under Hungarian leadership would the Danube River Basin, stretching as far as the Carpathian arc, be a place of prosperity and stability. The theory of domination was later developed during the war by another fascist ideologue, Tibor Baráth, in his 1943 book *Az országépítés filozófiája a Kárpátmedencében (The Philosophy of State Building in the Carpathian Basin)*<sup>32</sup>. In it, Baráth even went so far as to describe the hydrography of the region in detail and to elaborate on the socio-economic history of Central Europe. At the center of his “state-building philosophy” was the Greater Budapest (*Nagy-Budapest*), from which the entire region was to be governed. Domination of the Balkans would be Hungary’s window to the Mediterranean and an easier route to its ally, Italy. What does an ally say? Baráth did not answer this question. Tibor Baráth was of the opinion that the Central European region is a buffer zone between Europe and Asia. In his view, the stability of the region depended on it being ruled by a nation with a strong tradition of state-building, such as the Hungarians. Central Europe, on the other hand, according to Baráth, was in a sense the bridgehead of Asia, and it would therefore have been good if a nation of Eastern origin had been in charge (*vezetőnép*). Both Szálasi and Baráth did not avoid incorporating historical stereotypes (the Hungarians were predestined to rule the Carpathian Basin) and political myths (the belief in the power of assimilation and that the Hungarians, after assimilating the non-Hungarian peoples into the Holy Crown of Hungary, would become an ethnic bloc of 30 million people) into their theories<sup>33</sup>.

<sup>30</sup> Gy. Prinz, P. Teleki, *A magyar munka földrajza*, Budapest 1937, p. 30.

<sup>31</sup> F. Szálasi, *Cél és követelések*, in: *Magyar történeti szöveggyűjtemény 1914–1999*, ed. I. Romsics, Budapest 2000, pp. 75, 76.

<sup>32</sup> T. Baráth, *Az országépítés filozófiája*, Kolozsvár 1943, pp. 20–25.

<sup>33</sup> At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such plans were put forward by some Hungarian politicians and reported by publicists.

During the war, Pál Z. Szabó published a study on Balkan geopolitics in the context of Hungarian politics<sup>34</sup>. There was a formulation in his work about the heterogeneity of the Balkan region. He classified the northern part above the Zagreb–Istanbul line as Central Europe.

Another vision of a federation, which is interesting in its form, was developed in the 1920s by the Hungarian economist Elemér Hantos. He developed the idea of a political and economic bloc in Central Europe and presented this project at a conference of economists in Geneva in May 1927. Hantos was thinking of creating a great economic organism, but he entrusted the role of initiator of its creation to Europe, and the whole process was to begin in Central Europe because: “Europe’s disorder lies in Central Europe, so the process of reorganization must also begin here”<sup>35</sup>.

It appears that the idea of bringing the nations of Central Europe closer together was also supported by Hungarian politicians in power – not just the opposition. Prime Minister Bethlen, on a visit to Oxford in 1933, argued that the treaties that ended the First World War were harmful because they led to the Balkanisation of this part of the continent and dependence on Germany and Russia. He appealed to the powers that be, in the interest of stability and peace in the region, to embrace the idea of border revision and then support the idea of reconciliation among the peoples living in the region<sup>36</sup>. The Pan-European ideas initiated by R. Coudenhove-Kalergi found an advocate in Hungary in the person of Pal Auer, later president of the Pan-European Movement in Hungary. Auer also supported the confederation plan of the French politician Aristide Briand, the only difference being that the Hungarian politician supported the idea of a union of states rather than the idea of a “state of European union”. Like other thinkers, Auer suggested that federation efforts should begin with the establishment of an economic level and then move on to political issues.

By condemning the treaties that ended the First World War, the Hungarian prime minister condemned himself to “political banishment” in the capitals of Hungary’s neighbours. Thus, an alliance with Germany was linked to plans for the reconstruction of Greater Hungary. In fact, there was no country in Central Europe with which Hungary could carry out its geopolitical plans. Even Poland was not a viable partner for Hungary, which owed much to Horthy’s attitude in 1920. Warsaw had to maintain a reasonably good relationship with Romania and could not put a strain on it by supporting the Hungarian revisionists. Therefore, Hungarian diplomacy did not get what it expected from the assumptions of Polish-Hungarian cooperation, although they were laudable and based on historical foundations. The Hungarians were aware of this. When Foreign Minister Kánya got off Ambassador András Hóry in Warsaw in April 1935, he wrote, “My dear András, you are now in an outpost where you have nothing to achieve or prove. Warsaw is a dead place for Hungarian foreign policy”<sup>37</sup>. It was only in 1939 that part of the plan was implemented in the form of a common Polish-Hungarian border, and this was the only point that was realised.

In the first half of the 1930s, the idea of Hungary joining Poland’s Intermarium Plan also emerged. This idea has been very warmly welcomed on the Danube River. The only difference between Warsaw and Budapest was that the Magyars believed that such a bloc

<sup>34</sup> P.Z. Szabó, *A Balkanfelsziget földrajzi eróvonalai és Magyarország, Földrajzi Zsebkönyv*, ed. Gy. Temesy, Budapest 1943, pp. 142–150.

<sup>35</sup> É. Bóka, *Az európai egység gondolat politikai eszmetörténete*, Budapest 2003, p. 110.

<sup>36</sup> I. Bethlen, *A magyarság helyzete a Dunamedencében*, “Magyar Szemle”, December 1933, p. 306.

<sup>37</sup> M. Fülöp, P. Sipos, *Magyarország külpolitikája a 20 században*, Budapest 1998, pp. 191, 192.

should include Poland, Hungary, Austria, Germany, and Italy. No consideration was given to the states of the Little Entente, which for Poland were an important part of such an Intermarium, or later of the *Third Europe* proposed by Minister Józef Beck. Several factors were necessary to make the concept of the Third Europe a reality: a Hungarian-Romanian détente, a Polish-Yugoslav rapprochement and a strengthening of the Budapest-Belgrade line. With such a complex set of connections, the idea took shape that the main pillar of the Third Europe would be the Warsaw-Rome axis with possible branches towards Vienna, Budapest, and Belgrade and even the Scandinavian countries<sup>38</sup>.

In October 1934, a Hungarian delegation visited Warsaw and Prime Minister Gömbös returned convinced that Poland would never go to war with Hungary and advised that Hungary should improve its relations with Romania and Yugoslavia<sup>39</sup>. However, in contrast to Warsaw's expectations, there has been no improvement in Hungarian-Romanian relations. Hungary's only "regional" success was to insist on the need for a common Polish-Hungarian border during the visit of the Polish government delegation to Budapest in 1936. The idea of a regional bloc, proposed by minister Józef Beck, was in Italy's interest, as it was to some extent in opposition to German appetites. However, it was hampered in its creation by the alliances of the Little Entente, especially Czechoslovakia. There is a view among Hungarian scholars that joint action by Hungary and Poland against Czechoslovakia failed because Hungary feared that Poland would prove too weak against the Little Entente states if the conflict escalated, and that Germany and Italy would be unwilling to help Hungary if it began to act alone<sup>40</sup>. It should be remembered that Czechoslovakia was a country about which Hungary and Poland had divergent interests beyond the pursuit of a common border. There were differences over the plans for the future of Slovakia. Hungary saw Slovakia as bound to its state by a personal union, while Poland sought to reorganise the Czechoslovak state on a new basis. To reconcile the diverging expectations, János Esterházy was sent from Hungary to Warsaw in July 1938 with a proposal to grant Slovakia autonomy within the Kingdom of Hungary. Hungary wanted to revise the Slovak lands as much as possible, Hungarian diplomacy acted chaotically<sup>41</sup>, while Warsaw wanted to make these lands a protectorate dependent on itself and probably as part of a future bloc – *the Third Europe*<sup>42</sup>.

It was Milan Hodža, a Slovak politician, who initiated the idea of creating a Central European federation in the inter-war period. His idea of a federation was conceived in the first half of the 1930s, but as it did not meet with an adequate response in Prague at the time, it was continued during Hodža's emigration to London during the Second World War. Prague was not alone in being sceptical about cooperation between Central European countries. Nazi Germany also condemned the idea of a federation in Central Europe, a federation whose

<sup>38</sup> M. Kornat, *Polityka równowagi 1934–39. Polska między Wschodem a Zachodem*, Kraków 2008, pp. 307–352.

<sup>39</sup> A. Prażmowska, *Eastern Europe and the Origins of the Second World War*, New York 2000, pp. 174, 175.

<sup>40</sup> *Diplomáciai iratok Magyarország külpolitikájához. A müncheni egyezmény és létrejötte*, ed. M. Ádám. Budapest 1970, vol. II. pp. 209, 210.

<sup>41</sup> Hungarian political circles put forward too many demands without focusing on the goal. They did not agree with the Slovaks on granting them autonomy. The Slovak-Hungarian negotiations failed and, in the circumstances, Budapest had to turn to Germany and Italy for help, much to the displeasure of Warsaw. After all, the Third Europe was created to prevent the superpowers from getting involved in local affairs. S. Żerko, *Polska wobec autonomizacji Słowacji (październik 1938–1939)*, "Colloquium" (Akademia Marynarki Wojennej w Gdyni) 2014, no. 2, p. 79.

<sup>42</sup> T.L. Sakmyster, *Hungary, the Great Powers and the Danubian Crisis 1936–1939*, Athens 1980, pp. 153–155.

main element was to be economic cooperation, and Vienna, according to Hodža, was envisaged as the center of the federation (a cartel was to be established in Vienna to manage grain production matters in the countries of the region). Hodža hoped that there would be a growing interest in Hungary to take part in such an economic and political platform in Central Europe<sup>43</sup>. Milan Hodža's plan called for a federation of the six countries of the region (Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and Romania). However, support for the whole idea had to be won in the West. Interestingly, the plan was greeted with understanding in the West, but the lack of trust between the various Central European states, or the discrediting of the plan by Germany and the governments of the Little Entente, contributed to its failure<sup>44</sup>. This was the case with Romania. The head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs there, Titulescu, was interested in Romania's participation in the Central European economic cooperation plan. However, Berlin's intervention was enough to make the Romanian Government back away from the proposed federation. However, it cannot be argued that Hungary was only involved in building the new order in the 1920s and 1930s – it was also involved in destabilizing the region. Since 1927, they had been acting in concert with Rome to break up the unity of Yugoslavia. In their view, Yugoslavia was the weakest element of the Little Entente after Czechoslovakia. Hungarian intelligence was involved in the preparation of the assassination attempt on the King of Yugoslavia – Alexander I – in Marseilles in 1934<sup>45</sup>.

Meanwhile, in Hungary, a group of intellectuals formed in the 1930s that moved away from the political-territorial conception of the nation represented by László Ottlik. They regarded the people (*nép*) as the foundation of the nation. Gyula Székfü and Elemér Mályusz were the creators of this concept of the nation and the geopolitical vision of the state derived from it. In the mid-1930s, the first studies of so-called folk writers (*népi írók*) were published, such as *Puszták népe* and *Viharsarok*. The greatest activity of folk writers was in the late 1930s and 1940s. These were the times of border changes, of the actual revision. In the Hungarian press and academic publications, the Central European region was always mentioned, and an appropriate term was sought to express its specificity. The circles of popular writers also reflected on the creation of a new layer of leadership in the new Danubian Federation. This federation was to be a democratic creation, so the existing landed elite could not be involved as its leading layer. One folk writer, Dezső Szabó, was even of the opinion that the leadership of the federation should be the peasantry, with proper education, of course<sup>46</sup>.

The community of folk writers emerged as a result of the social changes that took place in Hungary in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is possible to speak of the formation of three worlds in Hungary, which did not necessarily interpenetrate each other, and certainly not of the visions formed by these worlds for the development of the state, its political system and its foreign policy. The first of these intellectual circles is "Urban Hungary", which emerged as a result of Hungary's economic transformation during the dualist period. The second is the "Lordly Hungary" (Hungarian: *úri Magyarország*), which includes not only the former political elite (nobility and aristocracy), but also the developing middle class and thus main-

<sup>43</sup> *A Palazzo Chigi és Magyarország. Olasz diplomáciai dokumentumok Magyarországról Gömbös-kormány időszakban 1932–1936*, ed. Györgya Réti, Budapest 2003, p. 595 (Document No. 355).

<sup>44</sup> M. Ádám, *Tervek a dunai államok együttműködésére*, in: *Békétlen évtizedek 1918–1938*, ed. L. Szarka, Budapest 1988, pp. 19–22.

<sup>45</sup> M. Ormos, *Merénylet Marseille-ben*, Budapest 1984, pp. 234–236.

<sup>46</sup> G. Péterfi, *Dezső Szabó és a nemzetiségi kérdés...*, p. 49.

ly urban areas. The Hungarian province, which did not have its leaders until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and with them its programme for the development of Hungary, diverged from these two socio-mental areas. The people's writers developed a vision of a so-called *third way* for the development of the country and the state. For the representative of the people's writers, László Németh, this third way for the development of the country should be "Socialism, which has nothing to do with Marxism"<sup>47</sup>. As early as the late 1920s, Dezső Szabó, a Transylvanian-born Hungarian thinker, began to reflect on Hungary's place in Central Europe. In a number of his works, this writer dealt with the position of the Central European nations<sup>48</sup>. He held the conviction that the European continent would benefit from the existence of smaller nations and states. According to him, the existence of small states in Europe and the world removes the danger that the world could one day be divided between four or five superpowers. Moreover, the situation in which Central Europe found itself between the First and Second World Wars forced the small states to coexist peacefully among themselves and to renounce any annexation. They could play a creative role in the region and in European culture if they persevere in their democratic humanism. Dezső Szabó complained that Hungary (and other Central European countries as well) did not pursue an independent foreign policy during the Horthy era. In Hungary, its absence and then weakness had its genesis in Hungary's relationship with the Habsburg state, when Budapest was deprived of influence in foreign policy. According to him, from the time of Mohacs (1526) until 1918, Hungary did not form a conscious foreign policy and political disputes took place similar to a division into two camps: the "kurucs" (Hungarian: *kurucok*) and the "labancs" (Hungarian: *labancok*)<sup>49</sup>. Only such a nation is aware of its foreign policy, knows what its vital interests are, and what goals it is pursuing along the path of historical development. Such a nation should pursue its goals and interests with its own resources and development strategies, Szabó wrote<sup>50</sup>.

At the end of the 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s, Hungary regained some of the territory it had lost in 1920. The Hungarian state, enlarged by the territories acquired as a result of the two arbitrations, once again sought a model of coexistence with neighbouring nations. László Németh, a leader of the folk movement, wrote about bridges as a symbol of reconciliation in a 1940 text. The lack of agreement between these small nations led to mutual slaughter as early as the Springtide of Nations; then, instead of Kossuth's idea of a confederation, there was the settlement, followed by the Treaty of Trianon; then came the times of winning against each other, first – as Németh wrote – within the Monarchy and then surrounded by the Little Entente<sup>51</sup>. In essence, the Treaty of Trianon caused Hungary to turn away from the West to some extent. The tragedy of the country's position after 1920 led political theorists to write that Hungarians were unwanted in Europe, that they had arrived here by chance and were completely unsuited to Latin civilization. There were calls for the unity of the Turanian peoples against the corruption of the Semites and the decadence of the Aryans<sup>52</sup>. Part of the Hungarian elite remained close to Kossuth's idea of a confeder-

<sup>47</sup> Quoted by László Németh from the work: K. Salomon, *A harmadik úton. Magyar iradalmi és történelmi sorsfordulók*, Budapest 2011, p. 94.

<sup>48</sup> D. Szabó, *A kis nemzetek sorsa*, in: Szabó Dezső Füzetek. 2. (February 1935) no. 6, pp. 53–61.

<sup>49</sup> Opponents of the Habsburgs and supporters of political unity with them.

<sup>50</sup> D. Szabó, *A kis nemzetek sorsa*, Szabó Dezső Füzetek No. 2, (February 1935), p. 6.

<sup>51</sup> L. Németh, *Most, punte, silta*, Híd No. 1, 27 September 1940, pp. 18, 19.

<sup>52</sup> *A Magyar Turáni Szövetség céljai és tevékenysége, Turán*, no. 74, 1921.

ation, while another part was of the opinion that there was a need for rapprochement with the states of Western and Central Asia, nations of Turanian origin. Of course, during the reign of Regent Horthy, the idea of the State of Saint Stephen, which had a Western, Latin origin, was important, but that didn't mean that Hungary's subordination to Germany was cut off. There was even a disconnect between the area of Europe that was squeezed between Russia and Germany, which could not be described as "eastern" or "central" in a geographical sense. Two intellectuals, István Gál and Domokos Kosáry, even proposed the name "Carpathian Europe". The delimitation of Central Europe began in Hungarian political thought after 1918 and was represented by intellectuals such as Oszkár Jászi and László Németh. After 1945, István Bibó and Jenő Szűcs were the proponents of this idea<sup>53</sup>.

Especially in the inter-war period, many Hungarian intellectuals tried to define the phenomenon of Central Europe (including Eastern Europe and the Balkans). When Gyula Szekfű referred to the idea of a "Carpathian Europe", he had in mind a region with a late-formed middle class, a region where nationalist slogans were formed not by the middle class and the bourgeoisie, as in the West, but by the most conscious part of society (depending on the region of Central Europe and the Balkans, by that part of society which maintained the consciousness of belonging to the nation: the nobility, the clergy, the bourgeoisie). In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the lack of a middle class meant that the assimilation process turned into dissimilation. In addition, Carpathian Europe was united by elements of a common geographical, intellectual and religious space and by tendencies towards socio-political development in the spirit of Western European ideas<sup>54</sup>.

In the mid-1930s, László Németh proposed domestic reforms as a prerequisite for any meaningful shift in foreign policy. He even claimed that Hungary's current foreign policy is dependent on its domestic policy. It is impossible to envisage a strong state and a strong nation in the absence of reform. He held the view that the "revision" should commence not externally, in relations with neighbours, but rather internally, in one's own backyard. It is essential to adopt an outwardly attentive and inwardly active approach if we are to strengthen our external position<sup>55</sup>. The most desirable reforms, as outlined by the folk writers, included agrarian reform, the separation of state and church, electoral law reform and the establishment of a federation with neighbouring nations. Dezső Szabó, at the time of the border revision that was just taking place, was of the opinion that Hungary should be neutral. Unfortunately, the thesis of neutrality did not enter the minds of Hungarian politicians during the Second World War (except for Pál Teleki<sup>56</sup>) and became a road of no return for the country. Folk writers were in fear of the aggressiveness of the policies of both the USSR and Nazi Germany. The prospect of pursuing a policy of border revision in collaboration with Nazi Germany did not entice them. Nevertheless, many representatives of these

<sup>53</sup> J. Szűcs, *Three Historical Regions of Europe*, in: *Civil Society and the State: New European Perspectives*, ed. J. Keane, London–New York 1988.

<sup>54</sup> J. Szekfű [Gyula Székfű], *Etat et nation*, Paris 1945.

<sup>55</sup> P. Pritz, *Magyarország külpolitikája Gömbös Gyula miniszterelnöksége idején 1932–1936*, Budapest 1982, pp. 183, 184.

<sup>56</sup> In 1928, Pál Teleki established a state institute to deal with neighbouring countries that had become part of Hungary after 1920. The Institute documented statistical and demographic data. Teleki's pupil was András Rónai (who died in 1991), but Rónai's scientific activity came to an end with the communist takeover in 1948. His most famous works include the 1939 atlas: *Nemzetiségi problémák a Kárpát-medencében* and the 1948 book entitled *Fejezetek a politikai földrajzból*.

elites wrote about a confederation of Central European and Balkan nations, an idea that was not popular in the second half of the 1930s in Romania or Czechoslovakia, for example. On this point, therefore, the views of the folk writers were close to the confederal idea of Oszkár Jászi. Jászi also argued that there was no room for any other solution in Central Europe between the millstones of Russia and Germany. In 1937, these views were changed somewhat by Imre Kovács. He wrote of a kind of “Central European Monroe Doctrine” in which Germany’s aggressive policy was already evident. Therefore, excluding the interests of the powers in Central Europe, he supported the idea of regional cooperation<sup>57</sup>.

In 1942, Count Mihály Károlyi, the leader of the bourgeois revolution in 1918, reflected on the first few years of the Second World War and concluded that the independence of the small states in Central Europe was and would continue to be an illusion. He proposed that the solution would be a central European federation, which would entail unity in economic terms as well. Here he praised the economic unity built up by the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, but condemned the methods by which power was exercised in that monarchy, which in his view was based on Austrian rule in “Cislitawia” and Hungarian rule in “Translitawia”<sup>58</sup>. During the Second World War, at a time of dispute over what Hungary should be and what role it should play in the region, László Németh also defined Hungary’s place: an independent and democratic state. In a speech in Szárszó in 1943, Németh defined the third way in foreign policy as follows,

Suppose there is one party in New Guinea which thinks that New Guinea is on its way to England. Another party says that New Guinea will only be happy under Dutch rule. Then somebody stands up and asks, “Well, can’t New Guinea belong to the Papuans?”. This is the third way<sup>59</sup>.

Political independence often ran through the views of folk writers alongside another idea – that of a departure from the concept of the St Stephen’s state, i.e. the “big nation concept”, in favour of the “small nation concept”. As a “small nation”, Hungarians should focus first and foremost on “internal revival” – strengthening themselves from within.

The period of border revision and then the Second World War forced the Hungarians to adopt a position close to Berlin’s foreign policy. Nevertheless, by the time Hungary entered the war in the first half of the 1930s, it had been experiencing a period of relative stagnation between Italy and Germany. Prime Minister Gömbös, on his first visit after taking office, went to Rome (because of his disguise as a Mussolini, his contemporaries called him *Gömbölini*). Gömbös’s successors continued to follow the same pattern until 1942, the first of which was to visit Italy. They could always count on the support of Italian diplomacy on the international stage until the mid-1930s. After the Bled Conference in 1938, Hungary was already able to arm itself and strengthen its army, and its dependence on Italy was no longer so obvious, and Rome was no longer a sufficient partner for Budapest in implementing the territorial revision. What was needed was a more effective actor on the international stage, and without a doubt that was Nazi Germany. In the Gömbös era, however, Hungary did not want to pursue the revision of its borders through a policy of aggressive annexation, but through a debate “in the spirit of law and justice”. In his 95-point government program, Gömbös did

<sup>57</sup> I. Kovács, *Dunakonföderáció*, Magyar Út, 1 April 1937, p. 6.

<sup>58</sup> M. Károlyi, *Federáció: Az egyetlen kivezető út*, “Új Világ” (Buenos Aires) 23 May 1942.

<sup>59</sup> K. Salomon, *A harmadik úton...*, p. 97.



not rule out the possibility of regional cooperation with neighbouring countries, but made the defense of the rights of compatriots in neighbouring countries a priority<sup>60</sup>.

Those opposed to Hungarian diplomacy (Czechoslovakia, Romania) and potential allies (Poland) favored being oriented towards the West. The United Kingdom and France were unwilling to consent to a rectification of the Slovak-Hungarian border following the Munich Conference. It was only with the support of Hitler and Mussolini that the first Vienna arbitration took place (on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November 1938). After the German occupation of Austria and the partition of Czechoslovakia (March 1939), Germany's ambitions in Central Europe grew to such an extent that Berlin had influence over many areas of the economic life of these countries<sup>61</sup>. In the early months of 1939, Hungary's geopolitical position in the context of the impending war became increasingly clear. The then Prime Minister Béla Imrédy was aware that Hungary's regional policy would be most influenced by Germany. In February 1939, Hungary became a signatory to the Anti-Comintern Pact. As a result of this decision, Hungarian-Soviet relations were virtually at a standstill. The decision to join the Pact was a mistake, as from the mid-1930s, Budapest's relations with the USSR improved and there were virtually no contentious issues dividing the two countries<sup>62</sup>.

**Figure 2.** Changes in the borders of the Kingdom of Hungary between 1938 and 1941.



Source: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/3/3e/Territorial\\_gains\\_of\\_Hungary\\_1938-41\\_en.svg/1443px-Territorial\\_gains\\_of\\_Hungary\\_1938-41\\_en.svg.png](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/3/3e/Territorial_gains_of_Hungary_1938-41_en.svg/1443px-Territorial_gains_of_Hungary_1938-41_en.svg.png).

<sup>60</sup> J. Vonyó, *Gömbös Gyula*, Budapest 2014, pp. 178–183.

<sup>61</sup> M. Ormos, I. Majoros, *Európa a nemzetközi küzdőtéren. Felemelkedés és hanyatlás 1814–1945*, Budapest 1998, pp. 397–400.

<sup>62</sup> C.A. Macartney, *October Fifteenth. A History of Modern Hungary*, vol. I, Edinburgh 1956, pp. 316, 317.

The slow disintegration of the Little Entente in the late 1930s, the relatively peaceful implementation of the border revision, and the rapprochement of the Central European nations increasingly dominant within the German *Grossmachtwirtschaft*, resembled the realization of federation in the region. Jászi in particular, who was in exile at the time, greeted this process with hope; let us recall that he had the same hopes for Naumann's idea of *Mittleuropa* during the Great War. This showed a certain naivety for this politician who, after some time, saw that what Nazi Germany had created in the late 1930s was an artificial creation based on terror and oppression<sup>63</sup>. Indeed, Jászi's evaluation of the Soviet system established in Central Europe following 1945 was identical. As late as the spring of 1945, Jászi was still advocating for the establishment in Central Europe of a confederation comprising smaller, local federations. The vision was indeed prophetic, as it was to be fulfilled a few years later with the integration of Western Europe. The Hungarian sociologist proposed an idealized Central European federation centered around the Vistula and Danube rivers, extending from the Baltic to the Aegean. This federation would have a population of over 100 million<sup>64</sup>. He considered this system to be inferior to the Nazi system that was in place during the 1930s and during the war. However, in his final assessment, he stated that the Soviet system could create a consciousness of economic and cultural cooperation in Central European nations, which could then, under normal conditions, result in the consciousness of an alien civilization becoming stronger and dominating the hitherto solidarity of the Slav nations<sup>65</sup>.

In 1936, István Bibó observed that Hungarians, as European citizens, are known for two key characteristics: a conservative approach to politics and social order, and a revisionist stance on foreign policy<sup>66</sup>. Both were inherited from the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and both were inimical to the democratic political and social order. In his works *A magyar demokrácia válsága* (1945) and *A kelet-európai kisállamok nyomorúsága*, Bibó sought to demonstrate that the solution to the chaotic political situation in Central Europe was democracy. He claimed that the Horthy Hungarian authorities had blamed the Treaty of Trianon on the Hungarian Republic of Károlyi and the Hungarian Soviet Republic, but had signed the treaty themselves. The authorities of inter-war Hungary created the conviction that the historical Great Hungary had to be rebuilt and tried to instill in the minds of Hungarians of that time the conviction of the great injustice that had been done to the country by the Western states. Bibó argued that the Hungarian elite's attitude to the treaty, and its fierce opposition to the treaty, prevented any attempt at democratization of the system. Wskazywał też na paradoksalne sytuacje, jakie wynikły po traktacie w Trianon. According to Bibó, the Czechs sought to emphasize the right of peoples to self-determination by highlighting the rights of the Slovaks, but the same rights were denied to the Sudeten Germans. In general, the problem of establishing the new post-war order after 1918,

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<sup>63</sup> In 1941, Jashi posited in one of his publications that the problem of Central Europe could be resolved only through the participation of a democratized Germany. Oskar Jaszi, *The Future of Danubia*, "Journal of Central European Affairs", July 1941, pp. 141, 142.

<sup>64</sup> O. Jaszi, *Central Europe and Russia*, "Journal of Central European Affairs" Spring 1945, vol. 5, no. 1, p. 3.

<sup>65</sup> Quoted after: Gy. Litvánem, *Homage to Danubia. Selected Writings of Oscar Jaszi*, Lanham 1995, pp. 122–130.

<sup>66</sup> *Geopolitics in the Danube Region: Hungarian Reconciliation Efforts...*, pp. 269, 270.

according to Bibó, was based on two contradictory concepts: one based on the establishment of borders according to pre-existing political-state organisms, and the other, contradictory to the previous one, based on the establishment of borders according to linguistic-ethnic units. Some of these state-political entities were established by the formation of new nations that were destined to become extinct from the map of Europe within a few decades, due to their inability to persist in the face of the rising ideology of nationalism. In considering the second peace that ended the war (the Treaty of Paris of February 1947), Bibó posited that the Trianonian borders could become definitive provided that Hungary was governed by a democratic government and the successor states (Romania, among others) approached the issue of protecting the rights of the Hungarian minority with understanding<sup>67</sup>. I. Bibó's views were aligned with the prevailing trends that emerged during the Second World War. The talks between Beneš–Sikorski and the plans for a Balkan federation drawn up during the war showed that the small nations of the region were maturing towards the idea of a federation. In 1942, Milan Hodža's book *Federation in Central Europe, Reflections and Reminiscences* was published in London<sup>68</sup>. Shortly after the war, Bibó also wrote about federation plans. Both intellectuals, though separated by a generation, saw the need for the federalization of the region. The only difference between Hodža and Bibó was that the Hungarian writer did not fully accept the idea of the self-determination of nations, while the Slovak recognized this principle as an important foundation of the Versailles order. This does not mean that Hodža was uncritical and positive about the "Versailles order". On the contrary, he argued that an important shortcoming of the international constellations in Central Europe was the creation of new states, states lurking on top of each other, and the failure to create a mechanism to force them to cooperate, the absence of which "paved the way to Munich"<sup>69</sup>.

During the war, former Hungarian Prime Minister István Bethlen sent a memorandum to the Hungarian government in 1940, in which he put forward the idea of creating a federal state in Central Europe with Hungarian participation. Such a bloc, including Hungary, Austria, Poland, Romania, and even parts of Yugoslavia, could have had a population of up to 60 million and could have been a solid bulwark against German and Soviet influence in Central Europe. However, the political elites of Hungary at that time deemed the plan unacceptable due to its association with the loss of Hungarian influence in the Slavic territories. This was a significant concern for the political elites of Hungary at that time<sup>70</sup>.

Following the conclusion of the war, Bibó posited that Central Europe would continue to represent a threat to post-war peace and order as long as uncertainty, anarchy, and disillusionment persisted within the region. Consequently, the concept of neutrality, as well as the idea of Euroscepticism, have emerged. This is based on the belief that it is preferable to avoid involvement in hostile political blocs. This concept was also apparent during the

<sup>67</sup> I. Bibó, *A békeszerződés és a magyar demokraciá*, in: *Válogatott tanulmányok*, ed. Tibora Huszára, vol. 2, Budapest 1986, p. 269.

<sup>68</sup> P. Eberhardt, *Koncepcje federacyjne Milana Hodży*, "Przegląd Geograficzny" 2016, vol. 88, no. 2, pp. 223–246.

<sup>69</sup> M. Hodža, *The Future of Central Europe*, "International Affairs" (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1931–1939) 1935, vol. 14, no. 4, p. 526.

<sup>70</sup> Gy. Juhász, *Diplomáciai iratok Magyarország külpolitikája 1936–1945*, vol. IV: *Magyarország külpolitikája a II világháború kitörésének időszakában 1939–1940*, Budapest 1962, p. 760.

period of Imre Nagy's revolutionary government in the autumn of 1956, which ultimately led to Hungary's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact. Earlier, in 1955, influenced by the deliberations of the Bandung Conference of Non-Aligned States, Nagy had proclaimed the idea of non-interference by large states in the interests of smaller states and commitment to the principle of independence.

When Yugoslavia proposed the idea of a federation in the Balkans, Imre Nagy proposed the idea of an institute for the economy and agriculture of the Central European region. From the late 1940s to the mid-1950s, Nagy repeatedly stressed that the small states of Central Europe shared a similar national and social structure. Analyzing the social structure, he argued that it was only after the war that opportunities opened up to bring the peoples of Central Europe together<sup>71</sup>.

Compared to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a century of decline for the Hungarian nation as a whole. The country officially became sovereign after 1918, but as a loser in the war, it had to go through a lot to become an independent political entity on the continental map. At the beginning of November 1918, General Franchet d'Esperey received Mihály Károlyi in riding boots, which was not maintaining the standards of the diplomatic service at the time. Similarly, in 1941, as Pál Pritz writes, the head of the British Foreign Office, Anthony R. Eden, who broke off relations with Hungary, declared through the Hungarian ambassador, György Barcza, that the last Hungarian politician they could talk to was dead (Pál Teleki) and that the British would not talk to the present authorities<sup>72</sup>. Following the establishment of the new political authorities in Hungary following the Second World War, Hungarian politicians believed that the democratization of the regime would result in Budapest being perceived with sympathy in the West. In 1946, Prime Minister Ferenc Nagy was in the US and wanted permission to adjust the border with Romania, arguing that Hungary's system at the time was the most democratic of any country in the region. Unfortunately, at that time, it was no longer just ideological factors that mattered. It was above all the agreements between the superpowers.

It is difficult to say whether Hungary had its own geopolitics during the communist dictatorship. This is a rather risky proposition to make. It should be remembered that the political leaders appealed to slogans of ideological unity and close Central European identity, characteristic of the peoples living here. As mentioned above, the 1920 Treaty came as a shock to the Hungarian political elite both before and after the Second World War. It was realized that the Hungarian people were no different from any other people living in this part of the continent: they were simply one of the small nations of the region<sup>73</sup>. The fact is that in 1945 a book was published by the geographer Aurél Hézser entitled *Geopolitikai helyzetünk egykor és ma*. However, the Communists did not refer to the idea of federation in any form. Remembering J. Broz-Tito's idea of federation and the Kremlin's reaction to it, they did not raise the idea of federation. It was challenging to refer to the common Habsburg traditions, as they were a rather conservative and monarchical tradition.

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<sup>71</sup> I. Nagy, *Dunavölgyi népek agrárproblémák*, in: idem, *Egy évtized. Valogatott beszédek és cikkek 1945–1954*, Budapest 1954, pp. 370, 371.

<sup>72</sup> P. Pritz, *Magyarország helye a 20. századi Európában – a magyar külpolitika esélyei*; Material available on the website: [mek.oszk.hu/05200/05284/05284.htm](http://mek.oszk.hu/05200/05284/05284.htm) (date accessed: 28.07.2023).

<sup>73</sup> *Élet és Irodalom*, 9, 12 January 1967.

Between 1945 and 1949, until the secession of Yugoslavia from the socialist camp, research on the Balkans developed in Hungary. Some of them resulted from pre-war actions being taken<sup>74</sup>. They were full of thoughts and beliefs that Hungary, because of its location, had an important mission to fulfil in the region. Dezső Elekes wrote in 1947 that there was a belief in Hungary that it had a kind of mission to the West. The time has come, he wrote, to see and believe that they also have a task to fulfil in the East<sup>75</sup>. The researchers noted that Hungary's location makes it a link between the Balkans and the Baltic region, as well as between East and West. A major blow to Hungarian geopolitics was the closure of the Hungarian Geographical Society in 1948. The works published in the 1950s on neighbouring countries were propaganda publications published for Hungarian industry, but their political dimension was completely distorted (Yugoslavia under Marshal Tito was a fascist state in them)<sup>76</sup>.

In this context, Kádár made reference to the concept of a community of destiny (Hungarian: *sorsközösség*). After seizing power in 1956, Kádár's team distanced itself from "bourgeois patriotism" following the suppression of the revolution. The concept of "Hungarocentrism", which can be defined as the prioritization of Hungarian interests above those of other nations in Central Europe, was identified as a detrimental ideology that served to isolate Hungary from its regional counterparts. In December 1964, the Hungarian leader told a meeting of the KISZ (Communist Youth Organisation): "The peoples of the Danube basin live in a community of destiny, either they will live together in prosperity or they will be destroyed together. There is no other way for the peoples of the Danube basin"<sup>77</sup>.

## Conclusions

The Trianon Treaty of 1920 had a profound impact on the thinking of Hungarian elites regarding the Central European region. It also marked a significant redefinition of the thousand-year presence of Hungarians in the region. The assessment of these phenomena was inevitably influenced by the different political environments that prevailed during the inter-war period. The ruling elites, mainly from the nobility, were of the opinion that a revision of the borders should be carried out: according to the letter of the law, after negotiations with the superpowers, or by force, using the advantage over the opponents, which was only guaranteed by the alliance with Germany. Nevertheless, there were also individuals within the government who contended that following the year 1920, Hungary could

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<sup>74</sup> There were even plans to set up a Southern Institute and a Southern Association to deal with the Balkans. In 1942, on the territory of Vojvodina (annexed by Hungary in 1941), a college of economics and commerce was established in the town of Újvidek (Novi Sad). A Balkan Commission was set up in Budapest in 1940 within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. After the occupation of Vojvodina, the Commission became more concerned with propaganda than with science and geopolitics. It published pamphlets that had nothing to do with reliable knowledge.

<sup>75</sup> Z. Hajdu, *Political geographical research of the Balkans in Hungary*, "Geographica Slovenica" 2001, no. 1, pp. 120, 122.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 126.

<sup>77</sup> I. Romsics, *Magyarország története a XX. században*, Budapest 2005, p. 514; I. Romsics, *From Christian Shield to EU Member. Perception of Hungary's Situation and Role in Europe*, "The Hungarian Quarterly" 2007, vol. XLVIII, pp. 3–27.

potentially retain its position as a dominant power in the region. However, they argued that this could be achieved without the necessity of military conflict, but rather through the advancement of knowledge, science, and a higher level of civilization over its neighbouring nations. This second part of the elite's narrative of the "cultural dominance" of the Hungarians was, to some extent, aligned with the prevailing views among the region's intelligentsia and those opposed to Horthy's rule. Those in opposition (such as folk writers) held the view that the living conditions of the most disadvantaged members of Hungarian society should be improved and reconciled with those of neighbouring nations. They advocated the creation of a federation in Central Europe as a means of achieving this goal. The urban opposition (also known as the *urbanusok*) held the view that the country should be modernized, with a particular focus on European values and a reduction in the influence of regional and national traditions.

These visions had already become obsolete by 1944, when Nazi Germany occupied Hungary and the Soviet Union established its influence in Central Europe after 1945. From that point onwards, geopolitical plans for the region were formulated in the Kremlin, and Hungary and its neighbours (except for Yugoslavia) were compelled to adhere to them.

The Hungarian authorities were unable to reinstate the "empire" that existed before 1914. By 1942, the majority of territories previously inhabited by the Hungarian population had been reclaimed. Nevertheless, the borders established prior to the First World War were not attained. The consequence of this partial revision was that the country was subjected to German hegemony. The decision to join the war on the side of Nazi Germany resulted in the territories that had been recovered between 1938 and 1941 being lost. In terms of geopolitics, Hungary became one of many small nations in a region where the democratization of the system was necessary. This occurred after 1945 under the auspices of the Kremlin, thereby precluding the possibility of sovereignty and a democratic system for more than half a century.

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