



## The Future of Hungary in the New International Order after World War II

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### A Review of the Volume

*Sebess, Pedro: Így dőlt el Magyarország sorsa: Három eltérő elképzelés  
a háború utáni világrendről – Sztálin, Churchill és Roosevelt*

[How Hungary's Fate was Sealed: Three Conflicting Views of the World Order  
After the War – Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt]<sup>1</sup>

Pedro Sebess originally published his book in Spanish, in Argentina, with the title: *Stalin, Churchill y Roosevelt Tres Visiones Sobre El Orden Mundial De Posguerra Y El Destino De Hungría*. The translation into Hungarian was carried out by Peter Kiss and Nóra Szekér, resulting in a user-friendly, good read. As the title indicates, the book focuses on the role of the major powers and their policy objectives during World War II and how this determined Hungary's future.

Sebess begins his analysis by tracing Hungary's geopolitical status following World War I and the French-inspired and -imposed Treaty of Trianon (1920). This dictated treaty contradicted the Wilsonian war aims of self-determination of peoples, which was to replace the defeated imperial order of the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Turkish Ottoman power centres. Out of this re-ordering, the author points out, Hungary was the big loser. (It lost 71.4% of its territory and 60% of its population, including three million ethnic Hungarians.) But, as he also points out, all the inhabitants of the region were losers in the long run because the punitive character of the settlement led Hungary and other revisionist states to work for its overthrow. This led to the horrors of World War II and its aftermath, to which Sebess devotes most of his study, particularly to the wartime decisions of the Big Three.

The study is well documented with the perspectives of the major decision makers based on sources and documents close to the scene. For Roosevelt, the author draws on the perspectives of his son, Elliott Roosevelt, as well as his close associates such as Harry Hopkins and Canada's Prime Minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King.

1 Published by Gondolat Kiadó, Budapest, 2020. pp. 269. ISBN 978-963-693-974-8.

For Churchill, the author draws on the prime minister's own writings as well as his private secretary, John Colville, the perspectives of Anthony Eden, and permanent Foreign Office Secretary Sir Alexander Cadogan's diaries. For Stalin, Chuev Feliks's interpretations via his Molotov interview and Stephen Kotkin's analysis are particularly insightful. These are tied together with the classical writings of John Lukacs, Liddell Hart, Nigel Hamilton, C. A. Macartney, and FDR's interpreter, diplomat Charles E. Bohlen. On the other side, particularly regarding the efforts of Italy, Hungary, and Romania to find a way out of the alliance with Hitler's Germany, the author depends on diaries – the diaries of Galeazzo Ciano, Miklós Horthy, Nicholas Kallay, and Joseph Goebbels as well as the records of the International Military Tribunal at Nurnberg in 1945 and 1946. He supplements all this with the recollections of Zsuzsanna Bonczos, who was the wife of Jenő Zilahi-Sebess, the father of the author, who was sent to Istanbul in June 1943 by the Kallay administration to contact the Allies regarding Hungarian peace prospects.

After the appeasement policies of France and the British Empire failed to stop Hitler's march to war with Austria's incorporation into the Third Reich, followed by the destruction of Czechoslovakia and the Wehrmacht's defeat of Polish military forces in September 1939, Hungary finds itself wedged in between Germany and the Soviet Union. As Winston Churchill concedes at this point: In the direct shadow of the Third Reich, Hungary could no longer follow an openly anti-German policy. Furthermore, until this point, Hungary's revisionist policies received the support of both Italy and to a lesser extent also Germany. However, the efforts to overcome the losses of Trianon put the Hungarian governments on a one-way track, leading it to German satellite status.

After Hitler dumps the Ribbentrop-Molotov (August 1939) non-aggression pact and attacks the USSR in June 1941, Stalin turns in desperation to the Western Allies to open a second front at Archangel in the north or in the Caucasus or in the Balkans. Surviving the seemingly unstoppable German advance is his objective. However, he changes his tune as soon as the German advance falters on the outskirts of Leningrad and Moscow. From this point on he continues to press for the opening of a second front in the West but far from direct Soviet spheres of interest. For Stalin, the Balkans are no longer considered a desirable option for a Western landing!

Winston Churchill, on the other hand, remains steadfast in his support for opening a Balkan front. He is aware of the legacy of Russian expansionism and realizes that the Dardanelles, the Balkans, and Central Europe are in the crosshairs of the Soviet advance after the tide of war turns in Stalin's favour. However, Churchill also realizes that the determination of the Allied strategy is now mainly dependent on the industrial might of the United States and the massive manpower sacrifices of the Soviet Union. He knows he cannot convince Stalin on the wisdom of a Balkan landing, so he concentrates his efforts on FDR.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, on the other hand, is not committed to a European geo-political perspective. From the moment that the USA enters the war, he thinks it is his destiny to establish a new global order. To achieve this end, the old British and French empires stand in the way. During the course of the war, he is constantly exerting pressure on the British to cede more power and self-government to India in the face of Japanese expansion in South-East Asia and Burma. At the same time, he envisions the creation of the United Nations as an organization to stabilize world peace and order under the direction of the four major regional powers of the world, the USA, the Soviet Union, China, and the British Empire. To achieve this 'Wilsonian dream', he courts Stalin and is willing to think in terms of a new bipolar world, in which Soviet interests and spheres of influence are guaranteed. This means no Balkan landing!

Pedro Sebess points out (p. 21) that those historians who did not see the serious conflict between FDR and Churchill considered the creation of a Balkan front simply as a way to mislead the German military so they would disperse some of their forces in the Balkans and thereby make the Normandy landing easier. This thesis is contradicted by the consistent return of Churchill to this question even as early as the Cairo and Teheran conferences. It is also contradicted by Churchill's last-ditch effort to stop the Stalinist plans by sending the British navy to safeguard the Dardanelles and by landing troops in Greece to fight the Communist guerrillas, much to Roosevelt's displeasure.

On the part of the Hungarian efforts to find a way out of the war, the opening of the Balkan Front was critical. According to Sebess, this was also evident in the Hungarian government's efforts to establish potential exile governments by financing Tibor Eckhardt's mission in Washington DC and the funds transferred to Switzerland for a potential second such effort in London. But because Churchill and Roosevelt had very different views on this question, and the latter did not want to alienate Stalin, the Balkan landing was still-born. However, until the German occupation of the country in March 1944, Hungarian leaders could not believe that the West was not interested in reaching Central Europe before the Red Army. To the very end, or at least to the time of the botched plan to switch sides on 15 October that year, they hoped they would not be occupied solely by the Soviet power. Sebess points to the numerous contact efforts in Turkey, Spain, Portugal, and Switzerland, where the different Budapest governments present their desire for a separate opportunity to withdraw from the conflict. He also stresses the instances when Hungary tries to keep its independence from Germany by refusing to grant the use of the country's railways to transport German troops to attack Poland from the rear; in fact, going one step further, by providing asylum for ca. 100,000 Polish troops that escape German captivity by crossing the Hungarian border. Attempts to keep out of the Nazi German alliance come to an end with the German attack on Yugoslavia through Hungary and the suicide of

Prime Minister Pál Teleki. Finally, after the bombing of Kassa (today Kosice), the Bárdossy government joins Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union. Even after this, there is a constant effort to limit Hungarian participation in the war, particularly by the Kállay administration, and, even after the Nazi occupation of the country, to forestall an Italy-style defection from the Axis. The most dramatic example of this was the action of Ferenc Koszorús's armoured division (on the orders of Miklós Horthy!) to stop the deportation of Jews from Budapest in July 1944. This saved the ca. 200,000 Jewish inhabitants of the capital, but it came too late to save the rest of the Jewish population from Adolf Eichmann's implementation of the Final Solution. Still, it was the only instance during World War II that an ally of the Third Reich used its troops to frustrate Hitler's policies to destroy the Jews of Europe.

I hope this interesting treatment of Hungary's fate during World War II is also translated into English. The narrative provided by Sebess is lively and interesting to the very end. Overall, I only missed a good name index and two or three explanatory maps.