

Ph.D. Dissertation Theses

**CHASING A MIRAGE:
HUNGARIAN REVISIONIST SEARCH FOR US
SUPPORT TO DISMANTLE THE TRIANON PEACE
TREATY, 1920–1938**

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The Subject and Objectives of the Dissertation

The dismemberment of historic Hungary by the Trianon Peace Treaty was a shock for the Hungarian nation and was perceived as one of the most severe national tragedies. Trianon became a common denominator, an overarching national issue for Hungarians during the period between the wars, and it provided the Horthy regime with a powerful unifying force. Revisionism was considered to be not only inevitable, but also possible. Due to the relevant provisions of the Trianon Peace Treaty and at the same time explained by Hungary's very vulnerable international position and her subsequent isolation after World War I, for long years during the interwar period the Hungarian government could not advocate revision openly and had to deal with the issue very cautiously.

Consequently, revisionist propaganda assumed great importance. Since it could not be directly part of the official political discourse, propaganda found new channels and came to be a central issue in the popular narrative. This explains why semi-official and popular revisionist propaganda became important means to promote the rectification of Hungary's post-Trianon frontiers, both in Hungary and abroad. Complementing the various manifestations of semi-official and popular revisionism, Hungarian history-writing between the wars also had its fair share, inasmuch as revisionism served as a major focus of inquiry in the historical narrative between the wars.

Based on some powerful criticism of the peace treaties made in Paris, (e.g. John Maynard Keynes, Francesco Nitti, and Lord Rothermere), Hungarians during the interwar years held the firm belief that a return to the frontiers of historic Hungary was possible with the support of foreign powers. As recent Trianon literature (Ádám, Bátonyi, Zeidler) also demonstrates, Hungarian revisionist policies and propaganda were primarily directed toward European powers such as France, Great Britain, and, from the second half of the 1930s, Italy and Germany. At the same time, the study of archival as well as secondary sources has revealed that Hungarians during the interwar period (especially in the 1920s) had high expectations toward the United States of America as a potential supporter of the revision of the Treaty of Trianon. Although the Hungarian government did not approach the US with the question of revision officially, several examples demonstrate that Budapest did not discourage revisionist propaganda directed toward America either.

The United States pursued the policy of political non-entanglement relative to the affairs of Europe after World War I, and completely withdrew from the Paris peace project and did not become a member of the League of Nations. This notwithstanding, Hungarians cherished

the hope that the United States would support Hungary's search to revise the terms of the Trianon Peace Treaty.

Within this larger conceptual framework and context, the present study offers the analysis of revisionism and revisionist propaganda directed toward the United States between 1920 and 1938. In my dissertation I study the above phenomena and provide an answer to the question whether such Hungarian expectations were more than wishful thinking.

I will argue that despite the popular Hungarian perception as *arbiter mundi*, the United States of America had no intention to meet Hungarian expectations relative to the revision of the Treaty of Trianon. Isolationist America consistently distanced herself from the question of Hungarian revisionism and revisionist propaganda aimed at the United States.

An inquiry with this special focus promises to be a unique academic contribution to the Trianon scholarship carried out by Zsuzsa L. Nagy, András Gerő, Magda Ádám, Mária Ormos, Ignác Romsics, Miklós Zeidler, Eric Beckett Weaver and Balázs Ablonczy in Hungary and, for example, Peter Pastor, Thomas L. Sakmyster, Nándor Dreisziger and Josef Kalvoda abroad. At the same time, the present work offers a study of a novel aspect of interwar American-Hungarian relations that so far has not been discussed. In this respect, the dissertation wishes to contribute to the academic research carried out on interwar American-Hungarian diplomatic relations by Nándor A. F. Dreisziger, Tibor Frank, Tibor Glant, Mark Imre Major, Peter Pastor, and Steven Béla Várdy.

Since Hungarian revisionist expectations toward the US to a large extent stemmed from certain misconceptions related to Wilson's Habsburg policy during the war and at the time of the peace negotiations, the presentation of the historical framework and the analysis of some key events of American and Hungarian history before, during and after the war are inevitable. Therefore, an introductory chapter provides a historical and political background to issues and questions analyzed in subsequent parts of the dissertation.

The dissertation also sets out to discuss the psychological, social, and political-diplomatic consequences and effects of the Treaty of Trianon to explain why revisionism became such a powerful, and misused, force in Hungary after the war. Attention is paid to the general features, means and role of revisionist propaganda between the world wars, with special emphasis on foreign advocacy of Hungarian revisionism. And the question why

Hungarians were so desperate to seek foreign support in their search to dismantle the Trianon Peace Treaty is addressed to provide a background to the subsequent discussion of the American line.

America became a popular topic of discourse in Hungary during the interwar period. Besides some unfavorable perceptions, Hungarians entertained predominantly positive images of the US such as, for example, America as the land of freedom, justice and fair play. Therefore, the present work presents the general features and various manifestations of Hungarian images of the US as *arbiter mundi* during the period between the world wars to demonstrate how these perceptions reinforced the Hungarian hope that the US would do justice and help revise the frontiers of Hungary.

The popular myth of America as a potential supporter of Hungary's cause was also backed by other significant yet misleading ideological, historical, and political tenets, such as for example, Wilson's Fourteen Points of January 1918 as the basis for peace, the belief that the USA did not wish to dismember the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the refusal of the US Senate to ratify the Paris peace treaties, or the lack of mention of Trianon in the separate US-Hungarian peace treaty. These provided the most important building blocks of the revisionist argument and expectations toward the United States. Official Hungarian history writing between the wars, in particular the efforts of Jenő Horváth, helped create and reinforce such beliefs. Therefore, the dissertation deals with these major thematic issues in connection with American war and peace policies relative to Hungary.

Hungarian revisionist expectations toward the United States were manifested in various ways. Since the Treaty of Trianon and Hungary's delicate situation in Europe between the world wars made open governmental revisionism unfeasible, at least until the second half of the 1930s, revisionist efforts found new, semi-official channels. The dissertation presents some important mainstream, non-governmental, yet front-line contributions to revisionist propaganda directed toward the USA, such as the efforts of Counts István Bethlen, Pál Teleki and Albert Apponyi. In addition, the role of some high-brow journals and foreign language periodicals (such as *Külügyi Szemle*, *The Hungarian Nation* and *The Hungarian Quarterly*) in Hungarian revisionist propaganda abroad is also discussed.

As part of the discussion of semi-official attempts, the dissertation studies the contributions of the official representatives of Hungary in the USA between the wars.

Besides semi-official campaigns, the dissertation also presents and examines examples of popular or individual revisionist initiatives directed toward the United States or key American decision-makers expressed in private letters, pamphlets, brochures, books and

even systematic anti-Trianon propaganda campaigns, i.e. Lord Rothermere's American activities, the Kossuth Pilgrimage to New York City in 1928 and the Justice for Hungary movement in 1931.

While the better-known Justice for Hungary movement is only discussed briefly, the dissertation studies the Kossuth Pilgrimage in greater detail, since it has not received sufficient scholarly attention so far. Besides memoirs and travel accounts written by some of the participant (for example accounts by Zoltán Bíró, László Faragó, István Vásáry), only few scholarly sources (Steven Béla Várdy and Ferenc Fejtő) deal with the pilgrimage. Therefore, the present work offers an analysis of this key revisionist event through the survey of available primary sources, such as contemporary press coverage and the relevant materials of the American and Hungarian archives.

The study of the various forms of Hungarian revisionist efforts directed at the United States aims to answer the question whether Hungarian expectations were well-grounded and if there was any chance that the American government would ever endorse the revision of the Treaty of Trianon. The dissertation analyzes the official American position toward Hungary and the revision of the Treaty of Trianon. This is done on the basis of the documents of the American State Department, including the official as well as the personal papers and/or the memoirs of American officials in charge of Hungarian affairs between the wars.

Within this context the views of Senator William Edgar Borah of Idaho on the revision of the Treaty of Trianon offer a unique case study. After 1920, Senator Borah repeatedly voiced his opinion that the postwar treaties made in Paris were morally, politically and economically wrong and should be revised. Such views obviously made him extremely popular in Hungary and gave ground to the belief that the senator could influence American decisions concerning treaty revision. An analysis of Borah's views explains to what degree this expectation was well-grounded.

Research Methods Applied in the Dissertation

The present study is both descriptive and analytical by nature. The dissertation draws on a great body of archival sources (i.e. the documents of the State Department of the United States and the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Külgyminisztérium*), the personal papers and memoirs of American and Hungarians diplomats and politicians, microfilm and microfiche collections, the then un-catalogued materials of the Bethlen Collection and

secondary materials available at various archives, libraries, and research institutions both in Hungary and abroad, especially in the United States.

The focus of the present dissertation inevitably determined that, primarily, I applied the traditional research methods of history. The diversity of sources, however, necessitated the use of other approaches as well, for example, in the study of cultural images and the analysis of the related press products. Even an oral interview was conducted with Professor August J. Molnár of the American Hungarian Foundation, New Brunswick, New Jersey (28 November, 2002 and March 10, 2003 at the American-Hungarian Foundation, 300 Somerset Street, New Brunswick, New Jersey, USA). The evaluation of Jenő Horváth's Trianon works in chapter four rests on the critical reading of his Trianon monographs and also on the textual analysis of the primary quotations Horváth presented to support his argument and their comparison with the original sources in question.

Research Results

While the Hungarian government's scope of action was limited and it had to resort to covert methods, Hungarian society sought any and all support for revision. Expressed at various levels of society and manifested in various forms, Hungarians had high expectations toward America pertaining to the rectification of Hungary's post-World War I frontiers. In view of the fact that isolationist United States was an unlikely supporter of Hungarian aims and that American decision makers felt that Trianon was a Hungarian obsession the Trianon question represents an awkward dimension of Hungarian revisionism and of American-Hungarian bilateral relations. My inquiry resulted in the following conclusions.

(1) Contrary to political realities, the United States assumed an important role in the eyes of the Hungarians with respect to the reestablishment of Hungary's pre-Trianon frontiers during the interwar period. Both as a cause as well as an effect, popular as well as serious academic interest in the USA arose. The geography and political life of the US became part of the university curriculum and travel literature about the USA continued to be popular with Hungarians. At the same time, Hungarians began to observe American holidays, most importantly the Fourth of July. This was also part of Hungarian efforts to reinforce the favorable view of the USA as land of freedom, justice and fair play. Lajos Kossuth's image in the USA and George Washington's image in Hungary acquired a great significance. Their cultural and political legacy was believed to be a bond between the two

nations and came to serve as an important ideological foundation of Hungarian revisionist endeavors aimed at the United States.

(2) The expectation that the United States should play a key role in the revision of the Treaty of Trianon was also based on major ideological, historical and political tenets relative to American war and peace policies with regard to Hungary. As explained in the dissertation, Jenő Horváth, the ‘official historian’ of the period, contributed to the creation of this myth. Still, a critical study of Horváth’s Trianon works revealed that Horváth’s interpretation relative to the role the United States may, and should, play in treaty revision, consequently the myth of the US as the promoter of the Hungarian cause, rested on misinterpretation, manipulation and distortion of facts. For example, the analysis of Horváth’s presentation of the Inquiry’s recommendations in connection with Point Ten demonstrated that he deliberately manipulated historical sources, ignored some historical facts and overemphasized others. Likewise, the study of Horváth’s interpretation of the diplomatic correspondence between Washington and Vienna in October 1918 points to the Hungarian historian’s tendency to adapt history to theory in order to reinforce America’s positive image as a potential ally in treaty revision.

(3) Since the possibilities of official, government level action were rather limited, revisionism found new, semi-official channels. As a result, focus shifted to the importance of international campaigns and civic and political education. Addressing the “learned American public” and academic circles and informing them about Hungary’s situation and thereby winning their understanding and support turned out to be a significant means for conducting covert revisionist propaganda in the United States. Counts Pál Teleki and Albert Apponyi’s visits to America in 1921 and 1923 respectively served these ends. Both Teleki and Apponyi enjoyed a good reputation in the United States, their statesmanship and expertise were greatly acknowledged. During their visits both of them met influential American political and economic leaders, and the American press also kept a close eye on their activities. That notwithstanding, apart from the publicity their lectures and talks gained for the Hungarian cause, their visits failed to influence American political decision making and did not yield any practical results.

(4) Within the context of the international effort to inform the learned audience abroad about the Hungarian question, foreign language periodicals such as *Külgügyi Szemle*, *The Hungarian Nation* and *The Hungarian Quarterly* also did their share. The topics they addressed and the agenda they followed shows that the United States was, indeed, one of their focuses of attention.

(5) Individual, semi-official campaigns and journals in English served an important role in the policy of the Hungarian government. Although Budapest distanced itself from open revisionism, it tacitly approved of such activities. Within such limitations, available primary sources indicate that Hungarian diplomatic representatives in the United States (Counts László Széchenyi and János Pelényi) found it difficult to further the Hungarian cause in America in their official capacity.

(6) Besides the semi-official ones, there are many examples for popular or private contributions to revisionist propaganda in America. A study of archival sources has brought to light a variety of revisionist efforts ranging from private letters through propaganda pamphlets and brochures to book-length accounts and even a PhD dissertation. Among them, for example, Jenő Pivány's "Statement of Eugene Pivány, National Secretary of the Hungarian American Federation" addressed to the US Senate in September 1919, Louis Kossuth Birinyi's anti-Trianon works, Stephen Borsodi's and Béla Krécsy's pamphlets are presented in detail. Generally, these popular or private efforts illustrate the Hungarian desperation to win any and all support from the USA. Many of them entertained popular myths, were overly emotional, often lacked the clear judgment of the contemporary historical-political situation and their significance was often overestimated, as was the case with Jenő Pivány's appeal.

(7) Among the systematic popular contributions to the anti-Trianon effort in the United States, Lord Rothermere's visit to the United States in the winter of 1927 and 1928 and his American activities gave Hungarian revisionism a boost. He put the Hungarian question into the limelight, and won over many Americans and American Hungarians for the Hungarian cause. Rothermere became the hero of the day. Nevertheless, US State Department documents clearly demonstrate that, despite the popular belief, Washington considered Rothermere's activities unfortunate and dangerous. Hungarians grossly overestimated the effects of Rothermere's American activities regarding America's support for the revision of the Trianon frontiers. Joshua Butler Wright's memoranda to the State Department prove that such beliefs were unfounded.

(8) Lord Rothermere's American campaign triggered two anti-Trianon endeavors: the Kossuth Pilgrimage in 1928 and the Justice for Hungary movement in 1931. Inquiry into archival sources in Hungary and the United States and the study of contemporary newspapers, personal accounts and memoirs shed light on important features of the Kossuth Pilgrimage: i.e. its ideological, political nature, its actual program and proceedings, its aims as well as its political and cultural effects. Although it was denied by the organizers and the participants, the Kossuth Pilgrimage was a covert revisionist propaganda campaign (with the

tacit approval of the Hungarian government) in America with the aim to win America's support. Kossuth represented democratic and liberal values which the Americans considered important and sacred. Kossuth's political and moral legacy came to be viewed as an ideological bond between Hungary and America, and in the context of Trianon it gained great significance. Still, contrary to expectations, the pilgrimage again did not bring the expected results, inasmuch as no official measures followed. Clearly, Washington wished to distance herself from Hungarian revisionism; this was clearly demonstrated by the exchanges between the State Department and the Royal Hungarian Legation in Washington, D.C. relative to the visit the pilgrims wished to pay to President Calvin Coolidge.

(9) Hungary was not among the most important partners for the United States during the interwar period. Nonetheless, a review of American foreign policy and American policy toward Hungary has shown that the Western European Desk in the State Department kept a close eye on Hungarian affairs, especially on revisionist efforts. With Hungarians holding high revisionist expectations towards America, the question was whether Washington would endorse the Hungarian cause. State Department documents and the memoirs and personal papers of the American diplomats in charge of Hungarian affairs between the wars (William R. Castle, Jr., and others) also demonstrate that such expectations toward America were not well grounded. The position of official America on Hungarian issues and the revision of the Treaty of Trianon was defined by a policy of political non-entanglement in European affairs.

(10) The case study on Senator William Edgar Borah's views on treaty revision offers the same conclusion. Borah held strong views about the Paris peace treaties and often criticized the Treaty of Trianon in particular. He believed that the treaties were morally, economically and politically wrong, so, consequently, they should be revised. Such public statements made Borah the champion of the Hungarian revisionist cause. His statements fed high expectations and created the false image that the senator could exert his influence on the official policy of the United States. A thorough review of his utterances demonstrates that he never considered political commitment to treaty revision in general, and the revision of the Treaty of Trianon in particular, a feasible option. Apart from moral and economic commitments, Borah never wished to entangle America with non-hemispheric, let alone Hungarian, affairs. Hungarian expectations toward Senator Borah, as toward the USA, therefore, were unfounded.

The policy of the total or partial restoration of historic Hungary was a major driving force between the wars. Revision by peaceful and strictly diplomatic means was considered to be the only solution by the Hungarian government until after the middle of 1930s. In this context, it can be generally concluded that, despite the popular beliefs according to which the

USA would endorse the revision of the Treaty of Trianon, official America did not support Hungarian revisionism.

Related Publications

“Attempts at the Revision of the Treaty of Trianon in the Light of American Hungarian Relations in the Interwar Period.” In Brückner Huba. Ed. *My Fulbright Experience*. Budapest: The Fulbright Commission, 2006: 97-109;

“Elszigetelődés vagy nemzetköziség a két világháború között: William Edgar Borah szenátor és az újjizolacionizmus politikája,” [Isolationism or internationalism between the two world wars: Senator William Edgar Borah and the policy of neo-isolationism] In Frank Tibor. Ed. *Gyarmatokból impérium. Magyar kutatók tanulmányai az amerikai történelemről*. Budapest: Gondolat, 2007: 158-169;

“Kossuth zarándoklat az Egyesült Államokba.” In Tamás Bényei, Bollobás Enikő és D. Rác István. Szerk. *A mondat becsülete: Írások a hetvenéves Abádi Nagy Zoltán tiszteletére*. Debrecen: Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó, 2010: 459- 466.

“Official America and Hungarian Revisionism between the Wars.” In Lehel Vadon. Ed. Special Issue in Honor of Professor Zoltán Adádi-Nagy. *Eger Journal of American Studies*. Vol. XII/1-2: 427-445.

“The Revision of the Treaty of Trianon: Unfounded Political Aspirations.” (accepted for publication for the festschrift honoring Julianna Puskás. Ed. Professor Zsolt K. Virágos).

”Revisionist Propaganda Targeting the US Congress between the World Wars.” (accepted for publication for the festschrift honoring Professor Zsolt Virágos. Eds. Lenke Németh, András Tarnóc and Gabriella Varró)

Further Publications

Reviewed Articles

“Common Images of American Society as Seen by Hungarian Travelers of the Pre-Civil War Period.” [Amerika-kép az amerikai polgárháború előtti magyar útibeszámolókból] In *Studii de limbi si literature moderne*. Timisoara: Editura Mirton, 2001: 163-169;

“Two Contemporaries Bölöni Farkas Sándor and Alexis de Tocqueville: American Democracy Praised and Criticized.” [”Két kortárs Bölöni Farkas Sándor és Alexis de Tocqueville: az amerikai demokrácia dicsérete és kritikája.”] In *2nd International Conference of PhD Students August, 1999, Miskolc*. Miskolc: University of Miskolc Press, 1999: 119-122;

Book reviews

1. ”Hungarian and Transylvanian Folktales.” [”Magyar és erdélyi népmesék”] *Hungarian Studies Newsletter of the American Hungarian Foundation* (1998).

2. "Hungarian Rhapsodies- nemzetiség, azonosság, kultúra." ["Magyar rapszódiaák- nemzetiség, azonosság, kultúra] *ITT-OTT* Vol.30, No.2 (129) (Spring 1998): 63.