

PROLOGUE

At the end of June 1945 Mátyás Rákosi went to Moscow for consultation, instructions and political discussions. While there, he lectured on the situation in Hungary at the Department of International Information (OMI) of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party. The department head, Georgi Dimitrov, asked a number of questions. He queried his guest as to why no people's tribunals were established for the conviction of the so called fascists.

"The fascist leaders have all escaped," replied Rákosi. "Not a single fascist minister or secretary of state remained in Hungary....The most prominent fascists are in British or American captivity and they are in no hurry to extradite them." Dimitrov was not satisfied with this explanation and added that it was readily understandable that the British and the Americans were in no hurry but that it was incomprehensible why this was not the central theme of the Hungarian media and of Hungarian political discourse.

Rákosi did not accept the criticism.

I refer to this in every one of my speeches and the Communist Party publications constantly write about it. If we had some of the fascist leaders in our hands we would start a trial but all we have is Arrow Crossist small fry. Trying them would have no effect and all the leaders are gone. When I read,

he added,

that in Bulgaria every minister was captured I was envious and said how that country could be so very lucky. In Hungary they are all gone. We hope that the fascist leaders will be extradited and then we will arrange for the trials. This is extremely important since otherwise the people will forget what these men have done.¹

The Hungarian political and military leaders captured in the West were finally returned to Hungary on October 3, 1945. *Szabad Nép*, the Communist Party newspaper informed its readership on October 16 that Dr. Ferenc Fenesi, the public prosecutor and Dr. Sándor Szalai, a journalist and lay prosecutor have prepared the indictment in the case of former Prime Minister László Bárdossy and that the trial had been scheduled for October 29.²

The death sentence was handed down on November 2. A few days later, the writer Gyula Illyés queried Lajos Zilahy, one of the most prominent Hungarian writers between the two World Wars, a member of the upper middle class and a former friend of Prime Ministers Gyula Gömbös and László Bárdossy. “What do you think about him now?” Zilahy replied, “Nothing, he is insane!”

According to Illyés’s diary, he then added somewhat apologetically, “I have argued with him whole nights through. He pointed to the large tree in front of the house and said that this is the tree from which he would hang.”

“Will he be hanged,” asked Illyés. “When?” “It would be best for him if it were done immediately,” answered Zilahy and then added, “He will be extradited to the Americans and then he will again be returned. He may have to wait for his death for at least three months.”³

As far as the extradition was concerned Zilahy was in error but as far as the hanging was concerned he was right. Bárdossy’s fate had been decided while the fate of the other former Hungarian prime minister, Béla Imrédy, was still in doubt. In Imrédy’s case Dezső Sulyok was the public prosecutor. When after the trial, and in complete privacy, Gyula Illyés asked him, “Is it death?” Sulyok answered, “Yes, but he will not be executed.” “Why?” asked Illyés. “We must hand him over to the Americans,” came the laconic answer.⁴

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Who was László Bárdossy, how did they make him into a “fascist,” why did he have to die more urgently than the real fascist Béla Imrédy, and how was the still controversial trial conducted? These are the questions that we will endeavor to answer objectively and calmly.

HIS CAREER

László Bárdossy was born in Szombathely on December 10, 1890, into a gentry-civil servant family. His father, Jenő Bárdossy, was a Ministerial Councilor and his mother was Gizella Zarka de Felsőőr. He completed his secondary education in Eperjes (Prešov) and Budapest and thus became familiar with some of the historic areas of Hungary. He studied law in Budapest, Berlin and Paris and, in addition to German and French, also learned English. His knowledge of languages and his very sharp mind soon raised him above his contemporaries. It is said that when he was taking an oral exam, his classmates passed the word, "Laci Bárdossy is being tested. Let us go and listen." His characteristic features were idealism, a highly moral perspective, a devotion to beauty and a strong preoccupation with esthetics. It is hardly an accident that the young graduate started his career in 1913 in the Ministry of Culture. It was in the ministry that he learned about the contemporary Hungarian governmental administration, its mentality and techniques.

He made very slow progress on the ministerial ladder. He started as an assistant clerk and in 1918 he was still only an assistant secretary. Hungarian history had progressed to the era of the counter revolution when he was promoted to the rank of ministerial secretary in 1921. This was still a low ranking and poorly paid position. Yet during these years he had been active and successful, having been for a period commissioner of education for Pest County.

The only truly positive feature of these years was national independence but even this was a dubious distinction for a crippled and internationally largely isolated country, whose societal developments were almost completely stifled. One of the requirements of the new situation was that an independent Ministry of Foreign Affairs had to be created. This work was begun by the liberal democratic revolution,

in the fall of 1918, but the bulk of the work was really undertaken in 1921, after major political upheavals and principally in order to establish Hungarian diplomatic representations abroad.

The possibility of employing the officials of the former joint Austrian-Hungarian diplomatic service who were Hungarian citizens, was a given for the new ministry. There were so many of them that they could have filled every position in the new diplomatic service. Yet the contemporary Hungarian public opinion viewed these old Ballhaus Platz representatives with a jaundiced eye and already in 1918 there were strong voices advising against entrusting the management of the new Hungarian foreign policy affairs to this otherwise fully competent group of officials.

There was, therefore, a strong inclination among the leaders of the ministry to recruit competent, multilingual officials from other ministries. László Bárdossy was one of these. It helped him to get a position at the Dísz tér, where Hungarian foreign policy was conducted between the two wars, that he had been active in the preparations for the peace treaty.

Bárdossy made the following statement to the American officer who was interrogating him on September 9, 1945,

The leading principles of Hungarian policies were established well before the World War II, and with the complete support of the vast majority of the Parliament and the population. In the light of these principles it was the evident moral and political obligation of every Hungarian government to make every effort and take every opportunity to recover the territories that were taken away at the end of World War I. This was a national obligation that was accepted and recognized by the entire Hungarian constitutional system. This obligation, stated openly and clearly, was assumed not only on behalf of the population of the crippled country but also on behalf of the Hungarians who were forced to live beyond the arbitrarily established boundaries.⁵

Bárdossy assumed his new position on February 18, 1922, and was assigned to the Press Division where he was appointed deputy chief. In 1926 he was promoted to ministerial chief of section and

soon thereafter he became the chief of the Press Division. On March 1, 1930, he was sent to the Hungarian Legation in London as counselor, which meant that in the absence of the minister he was in charge of the legation.

It was not a particularly elevating experience to participate in the direction of Hungarian media policies in those days. The prestige of the country was at its lowest point vis-à-vis the rest of Europe and the well-known circumstances under which the counterrevolution came into being caused great displeasure abroad. This was further aggravated by hostile propaganda. The national point of view and social progress were mutually almost exclusive and this was another reason why Hungary was in such a very difficult situation in trying to battle the hostile propaganda of the Allied Powers and the even more pernicious propaganda of the Little Entente.

There were two reasons for these difficulties. Hungarian propaganda included many outdated elements and it was not appreciated that harping only on the Hungarian injuries was hardly sufficient to gain devoted supporters for the Hungarian revisionist goals. During this entire period the nation was unable to confront the true causes for the collapse of historic Hungary and it was not realized until the 1930s, and not even fully then, that the borders of pre-1918 Hungary could never again be reconstituted.

The second reason was the lack of adequate funds. The sums devoted to media propaganda were a fraction of the sums devoted for the same purpose by the Little Entente countries.

Bárdossy served at the London legation until the fall of 1934 and on October 24 he was appointed Hungarian minister in Bucharest. His expertise and diplomatic abilities were well recognized in the United Kingdom. This is shown by the following story. In 1933, 168 members of the British Parliament formed a group supporting the Hungarian revisionist goals and at the same time Count István Bethlen was on a lecture tour in Britain trying to gain popular support for Hungary. This triggered a response from the Little Entente countries and, on November 29, the ministers of Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia went to Foreign Secretary Sir John Simon to protest. Through an indiscretion this became known and Bárdossy, who at that time was in charge of the Hungarian Legation, demanded an

explanation. The Foreign Office official who saw him gave an evasive answer and his superiors were engaged in formulating the official response. The affair was put before the administrative head of the Foreign Office and Permanent Deputy of the Foreign Secretary Robert Vansittart, who could hardly be accused of being friendly toward Hungary. Vansittart said, "Tell him [Bárdossy] as little as possible. He has a very good feel for things and is smart enough to ask the right questions."⁶

PÁL TELEKI AND LÁSZLÓ BÁRDOSY

István Csáky died on January 28, 1941, and Bárdossy was appointed the very next day to succeed him as minister of foreign affairs. Pál Teleki was generally inclined to postpone things but when he was convinced about something, he could act rapidly and decisively. He had known László Bárdossy for a long time and knew that he was a sound Hungarian gentleman. He had heard much about his cultural proclivities and his brilliant mind. The years in London and Bárdossy's activities in Bucharest also counted heavily in his favor. Bárdossy's family relationship to the late Prime Minister Gyula Gömbös did not bother Teleki since he knew that Bárdossy did not harbor any tendencies toward political extremism. He had heard that Bárdossy was unhappy about the social conditions of the country and was talking about criminal culpability, but this also did not distress Teleki since he shared these same sentiments but also realized how hard it was to institute changes under such difficult circumstances.

Teleki had to reach a decision quickly since it was evident to him that the Germans were not at all indifferent about the person who served as Hungarian minister of foreign affairs and that in exchange for their dominant role in making territorial awards they wished to interfere increasingly into Hungarian domestic matters. He recalled with great regret that in November of 1940 he was forced under increasing German pressure to padlock the Polish Legation in Budapest.⁷ The matter left a bad taste in his mouth particularly because he had hoped that the London diplomats would understand his reasons and realize that he had kept the legation open for fourteen months after the collapse of Poland. This is not what happened. The British minister in Budapest conveyed an expression of his government's displeasure on December 5, and

spoke threateningly of the future of British-Hungarian relations.⁸ Consequently, Teleki wished to produce a *fait accompli* and was therefore very pleased with the minister in Bucharest accepting the offer.

Hostile London

On February 7, 1941, Bárdossy received a report from György Barcza, the Hungarian minister in London, describing a conversation he had with Sir Anthony Eden, the British foreign secretary.⁹ Bárdossy had disliked Barcza for a long time, considered him to be officious and read his reports with considerable reservations. He knew that, contrary to the majority of the British political elite, Eden was hostile toward Hungary and hence he was inclined to minimize the significance of Barcza's report. He did remember, however, Teleki's admonition and therefore he reread the report very carefully and in detail.

According to the report, the British foreign secretary viewed Great Britain's relationship with Hungary based on the conviction that Britain would defeat Germany. Eden conceded that Hungary was under very heavy pressure but immediately added that Hungary's position was compromised by its revisionist demands and indicated that these demands were a significant component in making the situation even more difficult. After the war, Britain would assess the previous condition of Hungary and would examine not only her accommodation with Germany but also her endeavors for independent initiative. Among the latter Eden included Hungary's joining the Anglophobe Tripartite Pact, the strongly pro-German tone of the Hungarian press and radio and the permission granted to Germany to transport troops across Hungary to Romania.¹⁰

Bárdossy became infuriated and decided not to respond to the Barcza report. He thought that if Barcza exaggerated, there was no need for an answer. If the report was accurate, there was also no need for an answer since the report reflected a hostile attitude toward Hungary that could not be overcome. Five days later, the minister cabled again reporting that Great Britain had severed diplomatic relations with Romania because of the large number of German troops stationed there.¹¹

Bárdossy realized only too well that this action would cast a shadow over Hungary as well and immediately sent instructions to Barcza.¹² The envoy must emphasize that the transit of German troops was authorized by the Hungarian government on the urgent request of the non-belligerent Romania. Barcza was also to point out that for a long period of time the British government had not objected to the presence of German troops in Romania and Bárdossy considered this to be a covert criticism of the British action. The minister in London was also to state that the permit for the troop transit was given only to avoid much more serious and dangerous actions.¹³

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During the ensuing weeks there was no easing of Hungarian-British tensions. The principal reason for this was that German troops became ever more strongly entrenched in Romania and this further strengthened Hitler's international position while, at the same time, weakening the British position.¹⁴ This was at the heart of the issue and not the ups and downs of British-Romanian relations. They knew very well in London that German-Romanian relations were controlled from Berlin and that the Axis-arbitrated Second Vienna Award which divided Transylvania, was very unfavorable to Britain's former ally. Even though the current situation did not justify it, Britain was prepared to preserve its former attitude which favored Bucharest and opposed Budapest.

On March 12, Bárdossy sat at his desk and drafted detailed instructions for Barcza. Being very experienced in such matters, it was not difficult for him to express harsh words in a pleasant way.

"I have no doubts," he wrote, "that Your Excellency will always find and skillfully use the arguments that we can employ against the strictures Britain has seen fit to make against Hungary's behavior. For the sake of precision, however, I will deal with the strictures in order."¹⁵

Concerning the stricture about permitting the transit of German troops, he recalled that on August 30, 1940, in Vienna, prior to the announcement of the Second Vienna Award, the Romanian government requested that Wehrmacht units be stationed in that country. How could any rational person expect, he asked heatedly and not

unreasonably, that the Hungarian government would oppose the transit of the German troops and try to block it at the risk of the most serious consequences, at the same time when the British government did not consider it necessary to sever diplomatic relations with a Romania that had requested the presence of German troops?¹⁶

The change in the position of the British government was triggered by the changes in the conditions in the Balkans. Toward the end of October 1940, Mussolini attacked Greece. The dismal failure of this attack made it likely that Hitler would “resolve” the Greek problem. Because a suitably oriented Greece was critical for the British position in the Mediterranean, the German military presence in Romania became a serious concern.

It was easy for Bárdossy to point out that Greater Romania was largely indebted to Britain for its creation and continued existence. Romania enjoyed London’s economic and political support for twenty-two years, frequently in opposition to Hungary and greatly to Hungary’s detriment. It did not seem to disturb Britain that since 1937 Romania had established increasingly firm and friendly relations with the Third Reich. The removal of King Carol and the position of General Ion Antonescu were not the result of German armed action but, contrary to the view of certain London circles, the result of widely acclaimed Romanian domestic politics.¹⁷

If after all of this the intransigent British still claimed that in case of a British victory the new order of the Continent would be determined by the widest consideration of the demands of their faithful ally, Czechoslovakia and of their occupied friend, Romania, the British should not be surprised if in the face of such partiality Hungarian public opinion sought the support of its rightful demands from a different direction.¹⁸

Challenges and Contradictions of Symbiosis with the Germans

The challenges and contradictions of a symbiotic relationship with the Germans became apparent during these days in March 1941. The position of the Germans in the Balkans was greatly strengthened by Yugoslavia’s joining the Tripartite Pact. The Hungarian-

Yugoslav friendship pact ratified the previous December was received favorably in Berlin since it was viewed as yet another link in the chain tying the Yugoslavs to the Third Reich. The fact the Hungarians initiated the pact to strengthen their position vis-à-vis the Germans seemed to have escaped the leaders of the Reich. The German-Yugoslav negotiations underwent several stages and the weakening of the threads to London, in addition to the improved likelihood of Hungarian territorial gains, caused much concern in some Yugoslav circles.

Rumors reached Budapest according to which Prince-Regent Paul made the integrity of the Yugoslav borders a condition for signing the pact. Paul also wanted an assurance from Hitler that no German soldier would be moved across Yugoslavia. Greece was not mentioned but it was obvious that a potential march across Yugoslavia could have no other target.¹⁹

On March 16 Bárdossy summoned Otto von Erdmannsdorff, the German minister in Budapest, and asked for an explanation with the irritation of an ally who saw his interest being endangered. With the pride of an equal he insisted that the granting of the above guaranty would adversely affect the Hungarian-German relationship and would also have a strongly deleterious effect on Hungarian public opinion.²⁰ In order for Berlin to see the effects of conciliation toward Yugoslavia on Budapest, Döme Sztójay, the Hungarian minister in Berlin was instructed to advise the Wilhelmstrasse that if Germany guaranteed the integrity of the Yugoslav borders, Bárdossy would not make his introductory visit to Hitler.²¹

While a strongly worded negative message was received from London, the Hungarian demarche produced a message from Berlin that indicated that the Hungarian interests were favorably considered. Barcza reported that Hungary would face the direst consequences if it permitted the transit of German soldiers toward a country regarded as an ally by Great Britain and particularly if Hungary participated actively in any military action.²² Sztójay, on the other hand, could report that Berlin would guarantee the integrity of the Yugoslav borders only as far as Germany was concerned.²³

Consequently, the Hungarian minister of foreign affairs could hold his head up high when he went on March 21 to Munich to meet with

Ribbentrop and Hitler. Bárdossy was well aware of the fact that the strings could not be tightened any further. At the given moment the adherence of Belgrade to the Tripartite Pact was the dominant feature and, as far as the Hungarians were concerned, it was an adequate proviso that Germany would not stand in the way of a territorial revision at some later date.

Even at this visit, however, Ribbentrop who was an expert at table-banging diplomacy used some threatening tones concerning the tense Hungarian-Romanian relations and the lack of national recognition granted to the Germans in Hungary.²⁴ In contrast, the Führer once again dazzled his guest with his well-proven ability to hoodwink his discussion partner. For this reason Bárdossy returned home with the illusion that Hungary could look forward to the further correction of the Transylvanian border.²⁵

There was one extremely important point that was not directly a part of the negotiations. Hitler brought up the matter of the Soviet danger. Bárdossy, who was very sensitive to polished phrases, felt cold shivers running down his back when he heard Hitler say that if the Soviet danger became an actuality, Soviet Russia would cease to exist within few weeks thereafter.²⁶

The Belgrade Coup

At dawn on March 27, 1940, Bárdossy was awakened by the telephone. The call came from the duty officer at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The official reported that the coup was performed by military officers, who asked Prince-Regent Paul to resign and placed young Peter II, educated in England, in his place. Prime Minister Draghiša Cvetković was replaced by Dušan Simović and the pro-German ministers were arrested.²⁷ Bárdossy left his home immediately and went to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

There additional information became available. He received details about the coup and the Hungarian information services provided him with reports about how the British Secret Service wove the threads leading to the change in regime.²⁸ During the day he had several discussions with Teleki who was desperately anxious and unhap-

py, particularly when he found out that there had been a telephone call from Sztójay announcing that the minister was flying to Budapest on Hitler's plane, carrying Hitler's message to Teleki and expecting to arrive at 5:00 P.M.

Sztójay, overawed by the historic moment arrived on time and first met with Bárdossy. The minister reported that he had been summoned to Hitler at 12:30 P.M. and that Hitler started the conversation by saying in a very hurried fashion that he knew that the Hungarians were dissatisfied with the results of their revisionist activities and that Hungary had territorial demands against Yugoslavia. He said that the time had come to realize them. He berated the Yugoslavs and said that if fate wanted to strike someone, it made that person stupid. He sent a message to Horthy, saying that Horthy should invade the Banat and take as much territory as he considered satisfactory. He, the Führer, would agree to all demands and naturally also endorsed Bulgaria's territorial demands in Macedonia.²⁹

Following this discussion, Sztójay reported to the prime minister and then all three of them went to see the regent, by appointment.³⁰ Both Bárdossy and Teleki suspected that Horthy would be seriously affected by Hitler's message but did not expect enthusiasm lighting up his face and giving wings to his words.³¹

"Your Highness," said Teleki very unwillingly, "we are also aware of the magnitude of the opportunity offered to us. Yet, with an Eternal Friendship Pact signed barely a month ago, what can we do? What will Great Britain say? What will the world say? Your Highness, our national honor is at stake!" These last words were said very loudly by the prime minister who had a very difficult time in maintaining his temper.³²

Horthy did not appreciate it if someone talked to him about honor. He therefore harked back to that part of Hitler's message which stated that in the future there would be no Yugoslavia and that the fate of Croatia would be determined jointly by the Croats and the Hungarians. He therefore concluded that since there was not going to be any Yugoslavia, the pact obviously was null and void.³³

The not very smart Sztójay nodded diligently, but both Bárdossy and Teleki knew that the situation was much more complicated. London was unlikely to leave such a Hungarian action without reprisals.

Their comments induced the regent to suggest that they should postpone a decision to the next day and then confer again with the military leaders in attendance.

A night's rest made the regent even more enthusiastic and the soldiers fanned the flames even higher. Both Teleki and Bárdossy repeated their arguments of the previous day and tried to use the threat of a Romanian and Soviet action to calm the excitement. Teleki also stated that the small Hungarian military force had to be preserved. Yet, it became evident during the very tense discussion that some compromise had to be reached.

They could reach agreement on the text of Horthy's message to Hitler. In this letter Horthy agreed that the territorial demands mentioned by the Führer were real and waited for satisfaction. He also expressed his pleasure in having joint military discussions and closed by saying that the changes in Belgrade could not have taken place without the Pan-Slav Soviet influence.³⁴

The men drafting the letter were fully aware of the fact that the winds of change in Belgrade originated in London and not in Moscow and assumed that the German leadership was well aware of this fact. Because the great Hungarian political dilemma between Berlin's encouragement and London's firm opposition was a bottomless chasm, the mention of the Soviet's role in the events was an attempt to construct a bridge over the chasm. The bridge-building maneuver had to follow a script that would prove to be acceptable in London as well. Bárdossy acknowledged happily that he was in complete agreement with Teleki and they convinced the regent to send a reply to Berlin that was neither a negative nor an overtly positive one. This should gain them some breathing space to prepare a script acceptable to London.

Bárdossy knew that even the most daring construction was likely to fail and was also very dubious about being able to convince the new Belgrade leadership to assume a subservient attitude toward Berlin. It was in this spirit, attempting the impossible, that Bárdossy cabled to his minister in Belgrade, György Bakách-Besseney, on the next day.³⁵ Being conscious of the fact that he could not act openly, he instructed Bakách-Besseney to make a suggestion to Momčilo Ninčić, the new and former minister of foreign affairs, as though it

originated with him [Bakách-Bessenyei]. He should advise the minister of foreign affairs that empty oratory would not keep the Germans from attacking the country. Solid proof would have to be offered that in a German-Greek war they would not turn against the former.

An Evening Conversation with Károly Rassay

The second endeavor of the minister of foreign affairs was a matter of domestic policy. He realized that the strength of the domestic opposition was not significant and that at the present time it could safely be ignored. He also realized that in a complex international situation conditions may change rapidly and that the presently insignificant forces could assume a leadership position. This induced him to have a conversation with Károly Rassay.

He knew that the anti-German parliamentary speeches of the liberal politician created considerable respect for him, but also that he had been active in the creation of the present regime, that he was the state secretary in the Ministry of Justice of the Károly Huszár government (November 24, 1919–March 15, 1920) and that even as an opposition politician he maintained a certain loyalty to the successive governments.³⁶ Knowing that he was a deeply committed Hungarian, Bárdossy hoped that Rassay might provide him with some ideas that could assist in escaping from the present dilemma or, at least, promise his support for the forthcoming action against Yugoslavia.

He asked Rassay to come and see him in the evening. During the day he studied the arriving bulletins, talked to his associates and dictated instructions. He was both excited and desperate and could not hide this from his guest. He knew that he had to open the conversation and that his words had to result in Rassay's cooperation. He spoke of the effect that the changes in Belgrade had in Berlin. He confidentially related that Sztójay flew home on Hitler's private plane. Even though he was silent about Hitler's offer, he could reasonably assume that by sharing the above information, his guest would realize that Hitler probably contemplated some military action and that there was a great likelihood for war. If that were to happen it would be catastrophic for Hungary since it could not refrain from partici-

pating in the German military action. Bárdossy certainly emphasized the darkest side of the issue and not the possibly beneficial outcome.

These dramatic words made Rassay increasingly adversarial. “Your Excellency,” he said, “in my opinion, breaking our solemn commitment to Yugoslavia, undertaken in the Eternal Friendship Pact, would result in a catastrophe for us, would make us a subject for universal contempt, would make our country a battlefield and would make our slender economy collapse under the burdens of war.”³⁷

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In these stressful times there was no weekend rest at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and both the minister and his staff worked on Sunday. It was then that Bárdossy replied to Barcza’s query whether in the deteriorating Balkan situation Hungary would behave according to her commitment under the Eternal Friendship Pact.³⁸

Our position will depend, he wrote, primarily on the behavior of the new Belgrade government.³⁹ If they provoke an armed conflict, nobody can expect that the Hungarian government could remain idle and watch while the Hungarian areas illegally taken away in 1918 become occupied by German or Romanian troops. Even Paragraph 2 of the Eternal Friendship Pact recognized the territorial demands of Hungary and the authority to protect the Hungarians living there. The behavior of the new Belgrade government canceled the December agreement. With these statements Bárdossy, without directly saying so, accepted the German point of view and aligned Hungarian foreign policy with Berlin.⁴⁰

The Fateful Meeting of the Supreme Defense Council

In order to describe the Hungarian position, the Supreme Defense Council was called into session at 5:00 P.M. on April 1. The council was a governmental body under the chairmanship of the regent with the participation of the chief of the General Staff. It was staffed and administrated by a general secretary. At this time the position was held by Antal Náray, a General Staff colonel.⁴¹

The session started under a cloud since Teleki and Bárdossy had found out the day before that the military leaders had exceeded their authority. What happened was that the German General Friedrich von Paulus had arrived on Sunday and within hours Chief of the General Staff Henrik Werth had reached an agreement with him concerning Hungarian military participation in the action. Accordingly, Werth wished to start general mobilization on April 1. The Germans fixed the start of war for the 12th and wanted the Hungarian troops to cross the border and start their attack on the 15th. Werth obviously viewed the entire affair as a technical problem and only worried about the time required for mobilization and for the crossing of the border.⁴²

Teleki was incensed and even Bárdossy was made very angry by the gauntlet thrown into their face. Under duress, they agreed to the transit of German troops through Hungary but as far as Hungarian military participation was concerned they insisted that this decision had to be made by the Supreme Defense Council.

After Miklós Horthy's opening statement it was Bárdossy's task to explain the international implications of the proposed action. His freedom of action was severely curtailed by the fact that the regent had announced Hungarian participation as an accomplished fact and had designated the agenda of this meeting to be restricted to a discussion of the time of attack, its goals, the extent of the forces committed and their behavior.⁴³

After the statement from the highest authority, Bárdossy started his speech by saying that every opportunity for the liberation of their Hungarian brethren under foreign rule had to be grasped firmly. Yet, the Eternal Friendship Pact made it impossible to act as long as Yugoslavia existed. By this statement he negated the comments that he had sent to Barcza in London. He did not use the British as an argument and did not refer to any international issue but limited himself to a statement about Hungary's historic responsibilities. With this broad perspective he opened the discussion to a more measured and circumspect atmosphere.

He clarified his ideas about the date of engagement and designated the goal of the action as the retrieval of the territory that had been Hungary's for a millennium. He believed that such a step was defensible before the world. In contrast, however, he emphasized that

if Hungarian troops invaded other Yugoslav areas, Hungary would be guilty of violating political ethics and might become involved in military activities greatly contrary to national interests.

Looking first at Horthy and then at Minister of Defense Károly Bartha and finally at Werth, he spoke of the questionable outcome of the World War and stated that in case of a British-American victory, Hungary would not only lose the newly acquired territories but might be confronted with a situation worse even than Trianon. In conclusion he alluded very guardedly but unmistakably to the interest of the Soviet Union in the Balkans.⁴⁴

These reasoned sentences induced Minister of Interior Ferenc Keresztes-Fischer, Minister of Industry József Varga, Minister of Supplies Dezső Laky, Minister of Justice László Radocsay and Minister of Agriculture Daniel Bánffy to voice their own reservations⁴⁵ while Minister of Finances Reményi-Schneller and the highly respected Minister of Education and Religious Affairs Bálint Hóman urged alignment with Germany.⁴⁶ Werth attacked Bárdossy violently and argued that the enemy had to be pursued until it was destroyed.

The discussion was closed by the prime minister. He once again stated his ideas about the inexhaustible strength of the Anglo-Saxon world and about the conditions under which Hungary might take action. Finally he objected to the size of the forces to be used claiming that for a simple task of occupation smaller forces would be more than sufficient.⁴⁷

In closing the four-hour discussion, the regent decided on a limited action to achieve the Hungarian goals. He instructed the chief of the General Staff and the prime minister to agree on the number of troops to be involved and to submit the agreement to him.⁴⁸

A Dramatic Cable from London

On the afternoon of the following day, April 2, Prime Minister Teleki was informed that the German troops preparing to attack Yugoslavia crossed the German-Hungarian frontier on their way south and that their commanders had already arrived in Budapest.⁴⁹ He became so distressed that he decided to go to the Dísz

tér to discuss the not unexpected but nevertheless new situation with his minister of foreign affairs.

“It is beginning,” Teleki said when he entered Bárdossy’s office. Bárdossy knew what he meant since the news had already reached the ministry.

“Barcza’s cable from London has just arrived,” Bárdossy answered and immediately proceeded to destroy his envoy’s credibility. “He exaggerates and puts his own words into the mouth of the British to keep us from acting.”

Teleki remained standing and only held out his hand for the decoded cable which Bárdossy, also without saying a word, handed over to him. In the lapidary style typical of coded cables, Minister Barcza stated that if the Germans attacked Yugoslavia and the Yugoslavs resisted, as could be expected, they would immediately become the allies of Great Britain. In this case the response here to any change in the Hungarian-Yugoslav relationship would be as follows:

1. If the Hungarian government permits or assists German troops to enter the country and use it as a base of operations against Yugoslavia, we must expect that Great Britain will sever its diplomatic relations with all the dire consequences of such an action.⁵⁰

2. If the Hungarians were to join in the action, on whatever pretext, e.g. protection of Hungarians in Yugoslavia, an immediate declaration of war by Great Britain and a possible later declaration by Turkey and the Soviet Union must be anticipated. In such a case our behavior would be considered inimical to the Allies and, following an Allied victory, we would also be charged with violating the Eternal Friendship Pact. This pact here was interpreted to mean that for the time being we had relinquished our territorial demands.⁵¹

Teleki had read the cable in a quiet monotone, hoping that perhaps this would lessen his ever more severe distress. When finished he only said one thing and this seemed to be addressed to a Higher Power, “I have done everything I could. I can do no more.” He then added in a slightly different tone, “I am leaving.” It was unclear whether he addressed those present or perhaps his God.

Bárdossy only nodded his head and seemed to be frozen to his seat. His departing guest was ushered out by the chief of the Press Office.

Pál Teleki's Tragedy

The following morning, while at breakfast, the minister of foreign affairs received the not entirely unexpected news that the prime minister had committed suicide during the night.

Everybody realized that under the prevailing situation the post of the head of government could not be left vacant even for a few hours. Horthy immediately started the negotiations and summoned his advisers, his trusted friend Count István Bethlen, the highly regarded minister of the interior, Ferenc Keresztes-Fischer, and the personally disliked but politically very astute former minister of foreign affairs, Kálmán Kánya. All three recommended Bárdossy for the position. In these deliberations one of the principal considerations was the probable Berlin reaction. The person to be selected had to be neutral and not committed to either side. At this time László Bárdossy was still such an individual.⁵²

It was also in his favor that he had no political party at his back and, in fact, was not a politician. A man was needed who may have been deeply shocked by Teleki's act but who was willing to proceed according to the principles that had been worked out earlier, actually to a large extent by the late prime minister. A man was needed who was willing to implement the wishes of official Hungary. Bárdossy was willing to accept this role. He was promptly summoned to a regental audience and the audience itself was over promptly. Straight questions were given a straight answer.

The eulogy at the bier of the late prime minister was delivered by the new prime minister.

The First Days as Prime Minister

Somewhat earlier than anticipated, the German troops crossed the German-Yugoslav border on April 6 and the Hungarian-

Yugoslav border on April 7, sweeping all resistance away in their occupation of the country. The Yugoslav air force, supported by British planes, attacked Szeged, Pécs and Villány on the 7th and bombed the air fields used by the Germans. One Yugoslav plane was forced down and six British planes were shot down.⁵³ Bárdossy that same evening instructed Barcza to file a protest in the strongest terms, but did not proceed further waiting for any news from Zagreb.⁵⁴

London, however, offended by the events, did take action even before the Hungarian protest. While the cable from Budapest was still being decoded, Barcza was summoned to the Foreign Office and informed that diplomatic relations had been severed.⁵⁵

On April 10, the Hungarian consul in Zagreb, László Bartók, telephoned saying that Eugen Kvaternik, the Croatian Ustaša leader had declared the independence of Croatia.⁵⁶ This was the signal for the Hungarian troops to start moving. Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Bárdossy advised the regent to inform the country about the sequence of events in his proclamation. Bárdossy drafted the proclamation and Horthy accepted it without any amendments.⁵⁷ Bárdossy also considered it important that he not be held solely responsible for every consequence of the Hungarian action in case of a major change in the war. In order to document a joint responsibility he summoned the Foreign Affairs Committee of Parliament, under the chairmanship of Kálmán Kánya for 5:30 P.M. on the 11th.⁵⁸ In his presentation he emphasized that the goal of the previous administration was the preservation of peace in the Balkans and that this was the reason for the pact with Yugoslavia. He did not deny that the pact was an integral part of the friendly cooperation with the Axis Powers and of the political system based on this cooperation. It was the coup in Belgrade that upset all these arrangements. According to him the Eternal Friendship Pact was cancelled by the bombing raids against a number of targets in southern Hungary and the Hungarian government fulfilled its primary obligation when it responded by occupying the Délvidék (Vojvodina) an area which was part of pre-Trianon Hungary. Bárdossy did not refer to his cable to Barcza on March 30, in which he alleged that the pact was nullified by the Belgrade coup.

The first one to respond to the presentation was Count István Bethlen, the grand old man of Hungarian politics. Bethlen opened by

saying that he supported the actions of the government fully and without reservations. He claimed, “that under the prevailing conditions no other action was possible and that our national honor and millennial historic mission would have been sullied if, after the disintegration of Yugoslavia, we had not done our duty toward our ancient patrimony and our Hungarian brothers and sisters living there. However,” and here his voice became very stern, “the government has an obligation toward the country to see that the military take not one step beyond the historic territory that had belonged to the Crown of St. Stephen. We must accept the fact,” he said in a resigned voice,

that the Serbs, the British, and perhaps other countries will accuse us of a grave breach of promise. We must be clear that we will probably be unable to convince them of our rectitude. It is therefore even more important that the borders be maintained precisely to emphasize that we are not at war with Serbia or with any other country. In this way we might perhaps find some of the more objective foreign countries to be on our side.

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Since the Germans were carrying most of the burden, the occupation of the Délvidék was accomplished easily and rapidly. Bácska (Bačka), the Baranya (Baranja) triangle, the Muraköz (Medjumurje) and the Muravidék (Murje River region), a total of 11,475 square kilometer, with more than one million inhabitants were returned to Hungary. Of the population 39% were Hungarian according to the Hungarian census but only 30% according to the Yugoslav figures.