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Hungary's territory is revised after the First Vienna Award (November 2, 1938)

From the moment the ink of the signatures sealing the Treaty of Trianon had dried, Hungary's foreign policy devoted its main focus to territorial irredentism and was defined by achieving the goal of renegotiating the peace treaty's terms. This aim was so thoroughly entrenched in Hungarian society that its influence was even reflected in the rhetoric of day-to-day politics. During the inter-war period, the trauma caused by the Treaty of Trianon led to the development of an irredentist (i.e., a movement spurred on by the ambition to regain national territories under foreign jurisdiction) cult in Hungary. Following the peace treaty, various social organizations—such as the League for the Protection of Hungary's Territorial Integrity, the Hungarian National Association, the Association of Protective Leagues, etc.—formed with the goal of demanding the rectification of Hungary's borders. Irredentist catchphrases like “No, no never!”, “Put everything back!”, or “Hungary incomplete is no country, Hungary whole is heaven!” appeared even in the most unexpected places throughout Hungarian society. While irredentist statues were erected in public spaces, streets and squares were commonly named in honor of annexed towns or regions. Beginning in the second half of the 1920s, state ceremonies and semi-official general assemblies regularly made a point of observing the anniversary of the Treaty of Trianon. In combination with the ideal of instructing children based on Christian and national tenets, the topic of territorial integrity was present in all levels of education. As irredentism became increasingly popular, an assortment of mass-produced trinkets also appeared, including pins, postcards, posters and even wares like a mineral bottle proclaiming “No, no, never!” on its label, or an ashtray shaped to resemble Hungary's historical territory.



In 1927, after a British press mogul and politician, Lord Rothermere, published a pro-Hungarian article arguing for the redrawing of Hungary's boundaries based on ethnic borders in the Daily Mail, numerous foreign campaigns were organized with the aim of swaying both international and political opinion. In summary, the enormous emphasis public rhetoric and politics placed on revising Hungary's borders hindered other, alternative ideas concerning Hungary's future from emerging. To make matters worse, once irredentism became a simplified answer to just about everything, the process of coping with the trauma caused by the loss of Hungary's historical territory or understanding this event within a historical context was also impeded.





In spite of the rhetoric employed by day-to-day politics, Hungary could not lay out realistic goals toward revision while encircled by a host of hostile “Little Entente” countries. The country’s political leadership could only form the goal of attaining partial or even total restoration of Hungary’s historical borders as a sort of distant aim, one that would primarily require the aid of sufficiently powerful allies. In the 1920s, as it sought Central European partners for the cause of averting an Austrian-German Anschluss or Yugoslavia’s ambitions in foreign policy, Italy was the only ally to present itself. It was with this end in mind that the Italian-Hungarian Treaty of Friendship was signed in 1927. During this particular period not even Germany—preoccupied as it was by the “politics of fulfillment” laid out by the foreign minister, Gustav Stresemann—could have considered renegotiation of the peace treaty a serious possibility. Once, however, Hitler rose to power, the Nazi Party’s politics of expansionism sought to attain its goals with the help of Central European allies. Needless to say, this offered a prime opportunity for Hungary to regain its lost territories. Buoyed by the hope that yielding to Germany’s territorial demands would appease Hitler, the Western Great Powers (particularly Great Britain and France) proved surprisingly accommodating in the face of these Nazi ambitions for a long time.

Signed by the German Empire, Great Britain, France and the Kingdom of Italy in the autumn of 1938, the Munich Agreement awarded Sudetenland, a primarily ethnic German area located in Czechoslovakia, to Germany. This decision opened the door for territorial claims to be achieved on the part of Hungary as well as Poland. First, Poland took control of the Teschen (Český Těšín) region found along the Czech border, then in March, 1939, the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia was established under Germany’s jurisdiction. Czechoslovakia’s remaining regions fell even farther under German influence once Slovakia became a Fascist puppet state led by the Catholic priest, Josef Tiso.

Meanwhile, as a part of the agreement known as the First Vienna Award, on November 2, 1938, an arbitration award made by the German and Italian foreign ministers at the Munich conference returned the southern part of Slovakia’s highland regions to Hungary. Consisting of an area nearly twelve-thousand square kilometers in size, this region was home to more than one million inhabitants, 87% of whom were ethnic Hungarians. Taking possession of this territory, however, had actually begun before the decision was made: as a conciliatory gesture, Slovakia had already handed over the town of Ipolyság [Šahy], which officially became a part of Hungary following the first border revision. At this time other, large towns were also returned to Hungary, including the mainly Hungarian-populated cities of Kassa [Košice], Érsekújvár [Nové Zámky], Losonc [Lučenec] and Komárom [Komárno].

The Sub-Carpathian region, on the other hand, fell once more under Hungarian jurisdiction as a result of military occupation. From March 13, 1939 to March 17, 1939, the Hungarian Army seized possession of an area approximately twelve-thousand square kilometers in size and possessing a population of nearly 700,000 inhabitants. This population was mainly Ruthenian in ethnicity; only 15% of those living here were Hungarians. In order to pacify the Ruthenian population, the Hungarian government made assurances of granting wide-ranging autonomy, but these promises were never actually fulfilled.

The next step toward revising Hungary’s borders was the reannexation of Northern Transylvania and the Szeklerland region to Hungary. The precedence for this was provided by an ultimatum delivered by the

Soviet Union to Romania demanding the return of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina. Romania buckled under Soviet pressure, leading both the Hungarian as well as the Bulgarian government (the latter of which was eager to regain Southern Dobruja) to believe that Romania would be willing to revise its boundaries. In June, 1940, Hungary began to mobilize its troops stationed along the Hungarian-Romanian border. Hitler, however, did not support Hungary's military plan and even asked the Romanian king, Karl Hohenzollern, to settle the territorial debate between Hungary and Romania. Since this step did not succeed in solving the conflict, another arbitration award made by Germany and Italy became necessary. According to the Second Vienna Award signed on August 30, 1940, these aforementioned territories were returned to Hungarian possession. This area comprised a total of forty-three thousand square kilometers and contained 2.5 million inhabitants, 50% of whom were Hungarian, while 43% were Romanian. As a result of this diplomatic ruling, the cities of Nagyvárad [Oradea], Arad [Arad], Temesvár [Timișoara] and Szatmárnémeti [Satu Mare] once again came under Hungarian authority.

The already strained relations between Romanians and Hungarians were further exacerbated by the imposition of a Hungarian military and civilian administration. State employees, for example, were stood before political screening committees that then determined their level of loyalty to Hungary. It is no surprise that large numbers of the Romanian population—roughly 100,000 individuals—decided to flee Northern Transylvania for the Romanian-populated regions in the south. Similar to what Romanians from Northern Transylvania experienced, an equally difficult fate awaited between 100,000 to 150,000 Hungarians inhabiting Southern Transylvania, for “in the spirit of reciprocation” Romanians repeatedly pressured these Hungarian populations to leave by closing down Hungarian schools, interning Hungarians, etc. At the same time, local Hungarians remained suspicious of their Hungarian counterparts sent by the government for the purpose of administering the region. This suspicion was partially due to the fact that local Hungarians were also subjected to investigations concerning their national loyalty. To make matters worse, the mostly middle-class officials sent to administer the region often took advantage of their position.

The occupation of Bácska in 1941 not only represented the fourth and heretofore final stage of revising Hungary's borders, but also occurred parallel to the dissolution of Yugoslavia. In its attack on Yugoslavia on April 6, 1941, Germany made use of its satellite countries (Bulgaria, Italy, Hungary) as well. Once Croatia declared its independence from Yugoslavia on April 10, 1941, the Hungarian Army encountered little resistance as it took possession of Bácska [Bačka], Muraköz [Međimurje] and the Southern Lowland Region in under three days. Out of the roughly one million people inhabiting this entire 11.5 thousand square kilometers of territory, only 30% were ethnic Hungarians. Among the reannexed territories, the Southern Lowland Region presented the most complex ethnic composition, for this area was also home to ethnic Serbs, Croatians, Germans and Slovenians. In the Southern Lowland Region strained relations also arose between the local Serb and Hungarian populations, eventually climaxing in massacres conducted in Vojvodina in January, 1942. After Hungarian military forces eliminated Serb partisan groups resisting Nazi occupation, the civilian population was raided to avenge the loss of their men. This ethnically-based mass murder resulted in the deaths of over three thousand civilians—most of whom were actually Serb or Jewish in origin. Approximately 150,000 Serbs were subsequently expelled from Bácska. In the region surrounding Szabadka [Subotica], these displaced Serbs were replaced by groups of Szeklers. Later on, they, too, fled from the bands of Serb partisans led by Josip Broz Tito which employed a variety of techniques—surprise attacks, sabotage, etc.—to resist not only Nazi occupation, but also terrorize those viewed as civilian collaborators.

Hungary's political and military leadership proved incapable of reaching agreement over the Southern

Lowland Region's occupation. An advocate of armed neutrality and a peaceful revision of borders, Prime Minister Pál Teleki had doubts concerning Germany's final victory and felt that a world-wide, anti-German coalition could bring Germany to its knees. Readying his army to attack Yugoslavia, Hitler demanded military cooperation from Hungary as well as permission for German troops to cross Hungary's territory. Meanwhile, Great Britain informed Teleki that in the event of Hungary taking military action, Great Britain would break diplomatic ties with Hungary or possibly issue a declaration of war. No longer able to bear the pressure of this responsibility, Teleki committed suicide on the dawn of April 3, 1941. In keeping with his previous promises, Churchill broke diplomatic ties with Hungary a few days later while the President of the United States, Roosevelt, declared Hungary as aggressor.

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