



**30.10.1918**

## The Outbreak of the Chrysanthemum Revolution

**A**s the reality of military defeat became more and more obvious, growing anti-war sentiment convinced an increasing number of political forces and social groups to demand the war's immediate end and the beginning of peace negotiations. Throughout years of war, living circumstances had become increasingly unbearable; the ration card system proved incapable of supplying the starving masses with even minimal provisions. The circumstances surrounding daily life were further compounded by spreading waves of workers' strikes. Hungary's political opposition, on the other hand, wished to break away from Austria while simultaneously avoiding the eruption of any type of revolutionary movement. Since they did not identify themselves as supporters of the government responsible for leading Hungary into war, these opposition leaders expected the entente to enter into negotiations with them. At the same time, the opposition planned to grant ethnic groups certain concessions in an attempt to prevent their withdrawal from Hungary's historical territory. The leader of the Civilian Radical Party, Oszkár Jászi, planned to reconfigure Hungary into a democratically-based federalist system, founded on the belief of reaching equitable arrangements with nationality groups. According to his concept of the "democratic Switzerland of the East," Hungary would have become a confederate state while simultaneously bestowing a wide range of rights in self-government and autonomy to certain regions.



**T**he most strongly pacifist voice was raised by Mihály Károlyi and his party, the left-wing Party of Independence and '48. (The number "48" served as a reference to the year 1848, when the 1848-1849 Hungarian Revolution was still battling successfully against Austria; this date therefore symbolized independence from Austria and the dethronement of the Habsburgs from Hungary.) Descendent of a wealthy, aristocratic family, Mihály Károlyi had consistently supported independence during the era of dualism, resulting in his speedy break from the ruling, pro-Habsburg government and subsequent ties to the bourgeois radical movement. In foreign diplomacy, Károlyi sought options other than following German policy. Before the First World War was even to break out, Károlyi had already approached the Entente nations and actually had the option of spending the war as an émigré in Paris; not wishing to shrink from the difficulties to come, Károlyi instead chose to conduct his anti-war campaign within the Hungarian Parliament. While widespread opinion looked upon Mihály Károlyi as a supporter of the Entente, whether or not the Entente would actually agree that this was the case still remained to be seen.





Károlyi's pacifist politics were only to gain in significance following 17 October 1918, when Count István Tisza—Hungary's prime minister when war was first declared—publicly recognized Hungary's defeat. At the same time, Tisza was also forced to face the fact that the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy's various ethnic groups were raising increasingly vociferous demands to separate from the Monarchy in favor of national autonomy. The Entente powers supported the cause of independence for the Monarchy's nationality groups; according to the entente's vision, future states populated by Czechs, Slovaks, Serbs and Romanians would provide a buffer against the spread of Bolshevik ideals. Hungary's anti-war parties felt that integration of the country's territories could only be attained by following a political course that would fulfill the Entente's expectations; they therefore wished to offer concessions (mainly in relation to language usage or territory) to ethnicities in the hope that compromise would convince these groups to remain within Hungary's historical territory. The National Council was established by the Party of Independence and '48, the Civilian Radical Party and the Hungarian Social Democratic Party mainly in an attempt to force the appointment of Károlyi as prime minister, but also as a means of avoiding the outbreak of violent, mass demonstrations.

In a move completely independent of the National Council, a group made up of garrison officers stationed in Budapest as well as organised military deserters established a military council whose purpose was the preparation of an armed uprising against the extant, governing powers. Street demonstrations became so constant that even the police joined the mass demonstrations. On the night of 30 to 31 October, revolutionary forces under the leadership of the military council occupied strategic points throughout Budapest, such as bridges, the telephone exchange and postal offices. As the night drew on, these forces were eventually able to bring the entire city under their own supervision. Meanwhile, members of the National Council watched events unfold from the Astoria Hotel; their fear that local troops would be called in to suppress the uprising proved unfounded. After tearing the emblem of Austrian autocracy, the two-headed eagle, from their caps, the soldiers stuck chrysanthemums in its place, which is how this flower came to symbolize the civil democratic revolution, also sometimes referred to as the Aster Revolution. By the next day, the morning papers were already discussing the Chrysanthemum Revolution's victory, while workers cheered the revolution on the streets instead of returning to work. On 16 November 1918, the civil democratic revolution came to a close in front of the Hungarian Parliament, at which time it was estimated that the Hungarian People's Republic (also referred to as the Hungarian Democratic Republic) was proclaimed before a crowd of two-hundred thousand people. Until the later declaration of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, this short period marked the first time in Hungarian history when the nation was not ruled by a monarchy.

Members of the National Council took over positions of power while Mihály Károlyi was appointed prime minister. Károlyi's popularity was first and foremost due to his anti-war and pro-Entente political stance; public opinion had high hopes that his reforms would somehow save Hungary's situation. Károlyi and his colleagues did indeed embark on reforms: general voting rights were granted and numerous social measures were taken, such as the introduction of unemployment benefits. As far as foreign policy was concerned, Károlyi and his advisors felt that conducting organized, military resistance against invading forces (the Southern Slavic, Romanian and Czech-Slovak forces) would only serve to weaken Hungary's chances at the peace conference. Thus, no comprehensive measures were taken to block any kind of enemy invasion. Still in possession of their weapons following their discharge from the military,

former soldiers remained without work and—for the time being—without land either, a factor that convinced veterans to join the growing numbers of the dissatisfied.

**I**n the beginning of November 1918, contact was made with the Entente. Negotiations conducted with the chief general of Entente forces in the Balkans, Franchet D'Esperey, led to disappointing results: the entente was not willing to lift its blockade. Total disarmament of the Hungarian Army—barring one division employed for the purpose of maintaining internal order—was also demanded. Furthermore, Hungary was given notice concerning its occupation along the line linking the cities of Beszterce (in Romanian, Bistrița), Maros (in Romanian, Mureș), Szabadka (in Serbian, Subotica), Baja, Pécs and the Dráva River. Romanian-Serb and French forces were immediately dispatched to carry out this maneuver. These steps made it abundantly clear that the Entente would not support the idea of maintaining the integrity of Hungary's historical territory. The only positive result attained by the Károlyi government was that the occupied territories were to remain under Hungarian administration.

**A**s hopes surrounding the Entente dwindled, so did Károlyi's popularity. Confident that the entente would keep its promises, the Károlyi government still refrained from organising any form of armed resistance. To make matters worse, supplies remained inadequate for the population's needs. Taking far longer than expected, the law on land reform was finally passed in February 1919. Needless to say, the government of the Hungarian Democratic Republic did not last long enough to oversee the large-scale parceling out of land. As a symbolic gesture, the process of land division was first begun on the Károlyi estate, at which time approximately 1,500 surveyors initiated the parceling out of lands. In spite of this, Károlyi's division of land garnered few supporters: along with former estate holders forced to forfeit their land, Communists and some Social Democrats also did not agree with the measure. Hungary fell into even deeper internal and international crisis, while support for extremist groups gradually spread.

**T**he government's policy concerning ethnic groups also looked to be doomed to failure in spite of the fact that Károlyi's government intended to bestow extensive autonomy upon these groups until a decision had been reached at the peace conference. On 30 October 1918, Slovaks were the first to declare separation from Túrócszentmárton (Martin), the stronghold of the Slovak national movement, and were soon joined by the Czechs to form the state of Czechoslovakia. Under occupation by the Serbian Army, the region of Újvidék (Vojvodina) joined Serbia following a decision reached by the assembly of Serbian leaders, or voivode. On 1 December, the Romanian national assembly at Gyulafehérvár (Alba Iulia) took similar steps concerning Transylvania, in spite of the fact that the region's Hungarian population would have chosen to remain in Hungary.

**T**he Entente did nothing to hinder Czech, Romanian, or Serbian forces from occupying the aforementioned territories. By November, Serbs had already taken possession of the promised territories in Southern Hungary. In December, Romanian forces started their advance; by the end of January 1919 they were able to invade all of Transylvania's historical territory without encountering much resistance. In fact, the division of Szekler troops organized by Colonel Károly Kratochwill demonstrated the only example of genuine opposition. Mention should also be made of the fight that occurred between the citizens of Balassagyarmat and troops when Czechoslovakian forces invaded the city. In 2005 this small town located next to the border between Slovakia and Hungary received the title of Civitas Fortissima (the Bravest City) in recognition of their heroic defence.

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