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Introduction

The Italo–Ethiopian war was one of the most significant international events between the two World Wars. The Italo–Ethiopian conflict also had further parallel dimensions. Though Mussolini hoped that he would gain the support of France and perhaps of Great Britain, only the former however assured the “Duce” of her help through the French Minister of Foreign Affairs (Pierre Laval). However, the British government, after initial hesitation, decided to stand sharply against the action.

The League of Nations was also ‘forced’ to deal with the issue because of the protests of not only the Ethiopians but others, too. The League decided to institute commercial sanctions against Italy from October 9, 1935. These sanctions did not concern oil and steel exchange, although Italy’s East-African operations could have been paralyzed only with the prohibition of these two products. This is the reason for the issue of ‘oil sanctions’ in the League of Nations from the beginning of 1936 and, though they were never introduced, they served as a motivation for more aggressive behaviour by the Italian dictator.

In Mussolini’s opinion Italy’s position was strong enough to blackmail the League with a threat to resign since this would have led to the total collapse of collective international security. But Great Britain was unconvinced, so the Italian dictator had to find other political means to corner the island. The critical point of the British was Egypt and aware of this, the “Duce” was able to threaten them subtly with possible attack on their African treasure. Whether his plan was serious or not, both of the countries, England and Egypt, pondered the possibility of a coming war. Not only was Egypt at stake for Great Britain but also the Mediterranean route leading to India.

For Hungary the years of 1935–1936 were significant, too. Surrounded by the hostile Little Entente, it had not found a way out from isolation after the First World War until 1927, when the Italian–Hungarian agreement of friendship was signed. The treaty was undoubtedly a great diplomatic success for Count István (Stephen) Bethlen (Prime Minister between 1921–1931), since a victorious power of World War I seemed to be harmonizing its foreign ambi-

tions with Hungary. During the Italo–Ethiopian conflict the Hungarian Prime Minister was Gyula Gömbös (1932–1936) who was an admirer of Mussolini and his fascism.¹ But the Italo–Ethiopian conflict was one of those important events which proved that Italy as a Great Power existed only in fascist minds – indeed, they were not able to act successfully on the different stages of the world.² From this, of course, many drew the right conclusion.

The Italo–Ethiopian discord is a classic example how different and distant geopolitical regions can act on each other's future and fate. In this case, in my opinion, Italy's war in Ethiopia and its global aftermath made a crucial impact on Hungarian foreign policy, determining Hungary's future policy in World War II and after. Naturally, it did not work without transmission – without the League of Nations and its engine, Great Britain. Hungary was touched on her sore spot when sanctions were instituted against her only ally, Italy. Though the Hungarian political leadership tried to support Italy's policy, they found the African adventure quite harmful from the Hungarian point of view.³ As the war continued, it became clearer and clearer that the operations had tied down nearly all of the Italian military forces, thus practically creating a power vacuum in Central Europe which would obviously be filled by Germany. The increasing influence of the Germans was tantamount to the Anschluss. Until the Italo–Ethiopian war Mussolini was Austria's guardian angel, for example when in 1934 at the Brenner pass Italy prevented the German invasion of Austria. This event represents well the then cloudy German–Italian relationship, since the “Duce” thought that Hitler wanted Austria to gain a rival position toward the Balkans. Until 1936 the Italian dictator did not want German vicinity as Hungarians did.⁴

¹ See the best up to date monograph about Gömbös: GERGELY JENŐ, *Gömbös Gyula. Politikai pályakép* (Budapest 2001). See the English translation of the titles in the bibliography! Gömbös was often called by the Hungarian political opposition a “Gömbölini”.

² PAUL KENNEDY, *A nagyhatalmak tündöklése és bukása* (Budapest 1992), 275–281.

³ Goebbels, for example, wrote the following into his diary on October 1st, 1935: “*I list for him [Gömbös] our anxieties about Italy. He partly shares them. In his opinion, there would have been three more years for the Abyssinian question.*” In: JOSEPH GÖBBELS, *Napló* (Budapest 1994), 109. Gömbös's anxiety about Italy's preparations in Africa: RÉTI GYÖRGY, *Budapest–Róma Berlin árnyékában* (Budapest 1998), 64–65.

⁴ Though nowadays Italian fascism and German National Socialism are often thought to be the same (and sometimes they are even mixed with each other, e.g. when someone talks about the *German fascism*), we have to see clearly that even the people of the period realized the differences between them. This of course means that there were many people who rejected Hitler but at the same time were enthusiastic about Mussolini's Italy. As the noted Hungarian writer Gyözö Határ wrote: “Fascism then was not yet that chimera

One of the problematic points is the question of the increasing German influence in Hungary and how it managed to tone in with the already existing Italian orientation of the country.⁵ Focusing on this question, a number of studies start from the fact that Gyula Gömbös (Prime Minister between 1932–1936) had been urging the German–Italian rapprochement from the beginning of the twenties. Many researchers have concluded that Gömbös had actively taken part in the realization of this relationship during his four-years as Prime Minister.⁶ It is, however, obviously absurd to suggest that Hungarian foreign policy took the German–Italian alliance as a basis from 1935, or even earlier since it was realized only later on, after Gömbös's death. Still, it is not impossible that the Hungarian leadership counted with this possibility.

Gömbös entitled his politics '*realpolitika*' (a loan translation of German *Realpolitik*). Whatever he meant by this term, the fact is that for the 1920s the desire for the *revision* of the Trianon Peace Treaty (1920) was both a political and an emotional imperative. The loss of two-thirds of the "Thousand Years Old" Hungary took a heavy toll on almost all of the Magyars either emotionally and/or financially. Without undertaking the *revision* as their official policy neither of the governments of the era would have avoided the anger of public opinion and, with that, their fall.

Two ways of revision were theoretically possible for Hungary. The first one was the peaceful solution, which would have enabled the re-arrangements

[nightmare] that you think of today; in certain circles it was 'chic' and was presentable." In: HATÁR GYÖZÖ, *Életút* (Budapest 1993) 77–78.

⁵ In Hungarian historiography this question was last summarized by Dorottya Lipták in 1976. On the basis of this work we can mention Elek Karsai's opinion, who points out that 1933 was the turning point in Hungarian foreign orientation on the foundations of Gömbös's visit to Hitler. Iván Berend T. thinks that not the first but the second visit of the same Prime Minister was the touchstone in September 1935. Magda Ádám maintains, and so do I (see section III.), that in this question we have to start from autumn 1936 when the Italians were hesitating over the Yugoslavian attack but Hungary was already opposed to the plan because of the partner relationship with Germany. And finally, Pál Pritz prefers November 1937 when Kálmán Darányi (then Prime Minister of Hungary) visited Berlin. In: LIPTÁK DOROTTYA, *A Gömbös-kormány külpolitikájának egyes kérdései a magyar történelmi irodalom tükrében* = Acta Historica, Tomus LV (University of Szeged, 1976), 62–63.

⁶ The best known statement is in György Ránki's work from 1983: "Gömbös was the first statesman who had visited Hitler. The German orientation, thus, became the main motive of Hungarian foreign policy." RÁNKI GYÖRGY, *Mozgásterek, kényszerpályák* (Budapest 1983) 490. This statement cannot be true because of the simple fact that in 1933, at the time of the first visit, the Italian alliance was too precious to give up for the German one.

under the aegis of the League of Nations. The basis for this concept lay in *Article 19* of the *Covenant*, which, in theory, gave a possibility for changes of borders in case they were well reasoned and served the preservation of peace. The second was the military ‘solution’ of the problem, naturally not only relying on Hungary’s own resources but together with either of her strong allies. Considering Hungary’s disarmed position according to the Trianon Treaty, the Hungarian politicians favoured the peaceful way. The main mediator of the peaceful revision was Baron Pompeo Aloisi, an internationally respected politician (Italy’s permanent representative in the League), who defended the Italian viewpoint many times in the conference halls in Geneva during the Italo–Ethiopian conflict. However, he was the same person, who “efficiently stood by the truth of the Hungarians before the League of Nations any time.”⁷

In the light of this, it is comprehensible what a mess was made in the minds of Hungarian politicians during the African aggression of Italy. It was a moral dilemma for them since their supporters wanted to defend the ‘Hungarian truth’ while committing an obvious injustice somewhere else in the world.

The issue involved serious practical matters and dangers such as threatening of Italy with dismissal from the League. In this case Hungary should have chosen between her only backer and the League of Nations. Finally, the choice was manifested in the question of the sanctions introduced against Italy. Hungarian foreign policy tried to find a neutral standpoint in the question but at the time it was impossible.

2. From the Wal–Wal Incident to the Question of the Sanctions

The Hungarian politicians working for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were regularly informed about the coming of the Italo–Ethiopian conflict after the Wal-Wal incident.⁸ In Hungary the leftist newspaper *Népszava* (Voice of the People) was the first to cover the skirmish of December 5, 1934, three days after the event. From this time on the press regularly reported the matter. However, in the beginning they did not see more than a ‘usual’ colonial affray.

Towards the end of December Pierre Laval, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs and his forthcoming visit to Italy received the attention of the Hungarian newspapers. The cause of this growing interest can be found in the Hun-

⁷ Lexical article of Aloisi, in: *A Pesti Hírlap Lexikona 1937*.

⁸ ORMOS MÁRIA, *Háború Etiópia földjén* (Budapest 1970), 45. This work is still the only monograph in Hungary about the Italo–Ethiopian war and the international dispute.

garian antipathy towards the approach of Italy and France.⁹ Laval arrived in Rome on January 4, 1935 with two main goals. The first was to come to an agreement in the case of Central European security seeking the guarantee of Austria's independence by both states. The other question focused on the colonial claims of Italy.¹⁰ Both countries seemed to be quite content with the results of the negotiations, namely, with the *Danubian Pact*¹¹ and also Italy's colonial claims were satisfied by certain compensations in Africa. However, this last point, which became public from the agreement, said hardly anything.¹² It is obvious that the secret part of the treaty contained more significant provisions. Considering this Laval's behaviour was contradictory: he denied that he had 'approved' the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, but in the scope of later events, we can suppose that he did so.¹³ Baron Frigyes Villani, Hungarian minister in Rome, sent the following message to Kálmán Kánya, Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs on January 12, 1935:

News that Italy wants to control Abyssinia became frequent lately and even the public deals with it. I would not say that the masses sympathize with this risky business. A few days ago I had a chat with the chief editor of one of the biggest Roman newspapers, who claimed that if the "Duce" gives the order [to attack] there will be no disobedience.

⁹The Hungarian liberal opposition, however, took to the French–Italian approach because they thought Hungary could attain her goals in Paris through Rome. Gömbös, on the other hand hoped the same but he wanted to get to Berlin through Rome. (L. NAGY ZSUZSANNA, *A fasizmus, ahogyan a magyar liberális ellenzék látta = Történelmi Szemle*, vol. 12 (1969), 227.

¹⁰As it is well-known, Italy decided to stand by the Entente in 1915 because of the above mentioned conditions. But by the end of the war they practically had to leave empty handed.

¹¹The plan outlined a Central European collective security system (with Hungary, its neighbouring countries, Germany and Italy) which would have ensured the *status quo*. Hungary, however, rejected the plan. See JUHÁSZ GYULA, *Magyarország külpolitikája, 1919–1945* (Budapest 1988) 152–155.

¹²It covered only a few square kilometres in Libya and 20 % of the shares of the Addis Ababa–Djibuti railroad. Though the majority of the shares belonged to Ethiopia, it was more significant than the land itself.

¹³Later Laval wrote these lines in his diary: "In connection with Ethiopia I tried to convince Mussolini not to use force. [...] He started into the war against my will and my explicit protest." In: *Unpublished Diary of Pierre Laval* (London 1948), 34. The secret part of the agreement was discussed by Askew (1961), and a complete analysis of the whole matter by GEORGE W. BAER, *The Coming of the Italo–Ethiopian War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts 1967), 62–95.

But in general, nobody relies on the success of the adventure unless there exist such agreements which are not known by the outsiders.¹⁴

Two weeks later the journalist of the right wing newspaper, *Nemzeti Ujság* (National Newspaper), wrote about the Italian plans as already decided facts:

The price of the European agreements is in Africa. We can only wish, with bald egotism, that Italy's colonial desires and vital interests would be satisfied. [...] Thus the most important Italian problem now is the question of expansion or explosion – it can be solved only with the move towards the right direction. And this would serve the undeveloped Ethiopians, too.¹⁵

Almost the whole Hungarian press was on the side of the Italians from the beginning to the end of the conflict.¹⁶ Even the left wing *Népszava* (People's Voice) and *Szocializmus* (Socialism) came to a standstill with the scourge of imperialism and were philosophizing over the possibilities of the settlement of the "worker surplus" in the colonies.¹⁷ There were only rare exceptions, for example, in the *Nemzeti Ujság* in which an anonymous author refers to the colonialization as an „injurious attempt”.¹⁸

The leaders of Hungarian foreign policy sized up precisely that a possible lasting Italian activity in Ethiopia would throw Central Europe off balance and the new situation would result in a German–Italian rapprochement. In a letter that Gömbös sent to the Italian dictator on 11th March 1935, he asks serious questions about the international situation. It is clear from this text, that Gömbös had doubts about Italy's plans in Africa: “perhaps the French will be happy if Italy will be involved in an adventure far beyond its power, with the aim that they [French] may get a free hand in Europe? Perhaps the Abyssinian army is stronger than it seems?” It is obvious from the whole

¹⁴ OL KÜM K99 10/pol–1935. The full forms of acronyms of the archival sources are at the end of this article, see Abbreviations.

¹⁵ GESZTI LAJOS, *Abisszínia Olaszországé lesz* = *Nemzeti Ujság*, January 27th, 1935.

¹⁶ The only exception among the Hungarian periodicals was the monthly *Huszadik Század* ('Twentieth Century'), a radical liberal journal.

¹⁷ ASCHER LÁSZLÓ, *Abesszínia sorsa* = *Szocializmus* (1935), 417–419.

¹⁸ N.A., *Japán Afrikában* = *Nemzeti Ujság* (July 21st, 1935). Hungarian journalism was censored in this era even if not totally. In the case of the Italo–Ethiopian conflict it was Mussolini's request to the Hungarian government to try and steer the press into a pro-Italian direction. The Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs assured the „Duce” that the Hungarian press would work exclusively from Italian sources. Report of Colonna (Italian ambassador to Budapest) to Mussolini. Budapest, June 4, 1935. In: RÉTI GYÖRGY (ed. and transl.), *A Palazzo Chigi és Magyarország* (= PChM) (Budapest 2003), 318.

letter that Gömbös found the double role of Italy (i.e. in Europe and in Africa) impossible.¹⁹

Mussolini answered more than a week later:

In the Abyssinian question the events prosper absolutely normally – without rashness or intervention of any other power. The question of Abyssinia is – especially after the events of the last months and the difficult situation – primarily the problem of our Eastern African colonies' political and military security. Thus our aim is to create a clear situation and absolute calm.

Concerning the European reactions of the accidental Italian action in Africa, that Your Excellency pointed to, I want to reassure Your Excellency that our completed security measures in our Eastern African Colonies have not reduced the military power of the motherland, neither in its frames nor financially, and it will not be reduced in the future. My decisive aim is to be ready in Europe for every emergency.²⁰

Later Mussolini reassured Gömbös that Hungary could still count on Italy's unconditional friendship. As regards Gömbös he would have favoured only one „emergency”: if the Ethiopian action would have brought Italy and Germany closer to each other. However the rest of the letter disappointed him, because Mussolini was pessimistic about future Italian–German relations.²¹ In April there were unquestionable signs of the changing relationship between Italy and Hungary. The absolute orientation towards Italy was revised. Mackensen, the German minister in Budapest reported the following to Berlin on April 6: “The governor [Miklós Horthy] and the Prime Minister [Gyula Gömbös] do not see more in their friendship with Italy but an unavoidable set-up due to the recent situation which however will not stand forever.”²²

Three days later Hungarian sources mentioned the transitional deterioration of Hungarian–Italian connections. The cause of the loosening relationship was distrust because of the Laval–Mussolini negotiations and also the ever-developing German–Hungarian economic relations. Kánya in the Office of Foreign Affairs received this report from the Hungarian consul general in Milan:

¹⁹ Gömbös Mussolininek, 1935. március 11. In: PChM 285.

²⁰ Mussolini Gömbösnek, 1935. március 23. In: PChM 288.

²¹ Ibid. 289.

²² Mackensen's report to the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In: RÁNKI GYÖRGY etc. (eds.), *A Wilhelmstrasse és Magyarország, 1933–1944* (= WsM) (Budapest 1968), 140.

[Mussolini] emphasized [that] the French–Italian agreement is also a great step further for Hungarian hopes. The watchdogs on Trianon’s grave, the Little Entente had to be removed first in order to pull Hungary through. [...] But now the Little Entente is not that significant in the eyes of France as it was in the past. Today Rome’s word is crucial in the Danube-question.” However the consul adds: “Pro-Hungarian Italians here have been anxiously asking me whether Hungary would give up the politics of her absolute Italian orientation. Of course, I try to dispel these doubts whenever it is possible showing [...] that the rapprochement towards Germany is only based on economic interests because Hungary badly needs the German export market. [...] I feel that these doubts over our friendship have deep roots.”²³

It is clear, therefore, that the basis of the change in the Italian–Hungarian relationship was mutual distrust. Hungarian foreign policy was not sure at all of the fact that the Italians simply ‘inherited’ France’s influence in Central Europe. Their doubts were right, however, this quotation serves as a new proof of the German–Italian opposition, which was quite strong in that period (first half of 1935).²⁴ In the introduction I have already referred to the opinion of Hungarian politicians, who objected to closer diplomatic relations with Germany. But from an economic point of view, Hungary was dependent on the German market.²⁵ While economic relations had been built between the two countries, closer political connections were rejected by the ministry of foreign affairs and also the general staff for many reasons.²⁶ Vilmos Röder, the head of the Hungarian general staff, tried to con-

²³ OL KÜM K99 7/biz.–35 1935–2.

²⁴ On the basis of Mária Ormos’s research we can state that the Hungarians did not think the Danubian Pact to be realistic, and on the other hand, they wanted territorial results in the question of the Revision. Everything that promised less than this was regarded as misleading. ORMOS MÁRIA, *Franciaország és a keleti biztonság* (Budapest 1969), 353–354.

²⁵ See RÁNKI GYÖRGY, *Gazdaság és külpolitika* (Budapest 1981), 256–257.

²⁶ The memoir of the general staff from December 1935 serves as proof of this. The document states that: “Italy does not feel desirable the vicinity of the German Empire with 70 million people.” In: HETÉS TIBOR and MORVA TAMÁSNÉ (eds.), *Csak szolgálati használatra! Iratok a Horthy hadsereg történetéhez* (= IHht) (Budapest 1968), 352. If they thought these things in December, it had surely been the situation half a year before when Italy had had her total military potential on the Continent. The viewpoint of the Gömbös government is well-represented from an official publication in which is summarized the formation of Hungarian foreign connections between 1932–1935. It is worth looking at the phrases used. In the opinion of the authors the relationship with Italy is “intimate”, with Austria and Turkey it is “friendly” and with England and France it is “cordial”. On the other side, the connections with Germany

vince the Italian military leaders of this. He instructed the Hungarian military attaché in Rome, László Szabó as follows:

Go to Baistrocchi²⁷ and Pariani²⁸ and deliver the following message of mine, which has been approved by the head of the Hungarian government and the ministry of foreign affairs.

1. Hungary will never be ungrateful to Italy and will not turn those weapons against the Italians that were given by the Italians.
2. On the part of Hungary, military or any other kind of information given by the Italians, will not be transmitted neither directly nor indirectly to Germany or anybody else. [...]
3. It was never stated that Hungary would take part in an anti–Italian block with Germany.
4. In our opinion the Germans and the Italians mutually misunderstand each other. The Germans believe that Italy wants the Danube – the Italians believe that Germany wants the Brenner border. [...] If these misunderstandings cannot be eliminated it is to be feared that the Little Entente will fall totally into Germany’s hands. In case of a mutual comprehension not only would Hungary be liberated from the German pressure but also the friendship of the nations would come to life.²⁹

For Hungary, it was not advisable to accept an open German orientation since at the Stresa Conference Italy showed her anti–German stance again. The conference opened on April 11, 1935 with the participation of France, Great Britain and Italy. The original aim of the meeting was to demonstrate a united front of the Great Powers against Germany, which had declared its remilitarization in March. The conference would have been a suitable occasion for England to make clear the colonial plans of Mussolini. The English delegation, however, remained silent and their presence at the conference was disingenuous since the secret negotiations about the fleet agreement between Britain and Germany had been in progress for four months.³⁰ Silence gives con-

and the Soviet Union are without qualification. In: *A Gömbös-kormány három esztendő munkássága, 1932–1935* (Budapest 1935).

²⁷ Italian under secretary in the Ministry of War.

²⁸ The Italian Minister of War.

²⁹ IHht 341–343.

³⁰ H. HARASZTI ÉVA, *Békéltetők. A brit külpolitika az 1930-as években* (Budapest 1981), 35. The agreement was signed on June 18th, 1935. We know from Churchill that an unfortunate accident has greatly influenced the English silence at Stresa. The most prominent participant of the conference would have been Simon, Minister of Foreign Affairs who would have been accompanied by Antony Eden. Eden, however, had a nervous breakdown and could not be present at the meeting. Churchill felt sorry for

sent and Mussolini took the silence as a “yes” to his plans, thus there had been no obstacle to sign the anti-German final act.

The Stresa declaration of the three Great Powers made the German-Italian relationship only worse. Though Mussolini kept on stressing that the African operations would not weaken Italy’s European presence, the “Duce” obviously knew that he had to moderate his hostile politics towards Germany, at least during the war. June 1935 brought a crucial turn in the German-Italian connections. Towards the end of May news was brought to Hungary about the long awaited improvement. An unknown author wrote that “in the Berlin diplomatic circle an opinion is spreading, in connection with the question of Abyssinia, that now Italy is the one who looks for support in Germany and in return Italy would be compliant about the question of Austria.”³¹ The affirmation from the Hungarian embassy in Rome arrived in Budapest within a week:

The German-Italian connection shows really a pleasing improvement. [...] The Italian newspapers, because of the orders from above, avoid all kinds of attack [against Germany] in the last few days and the German press welcomes the Italian operations in Abyssinia so much that it seems to engage in polemic even with the English, too. About this German approach Suvich³² said appreciative words to me stressing that the “Duce”, who regards this question as the touchstone of the foreign powers, is very satisfied with the behaviour of Berlin. [...] Hassell³³ added to this funnily that the negus deserves a statue in Berlin because he is the one who can be thanked for the rapprochement between Germany and Italy, which earlier seemed to be totally impossible. [...] In all, I can state that the question of the Anschluss, which got in the focus of the Italian foreign policy, became only the second after the question of Ethiopia.³⁴

him because Eden would have surely raised the question of Ethiopia; WINSTON S. CHURCHILL, *A második világháború* (Budapest 1989), 52–53. On the other hand there is certain information that, though not formally but within the frames of private conversations, the problem has arisen. Vansittart, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs is said to have dissuaded the Italians from their African plans; ORMOS (1970), 50. According to the Hungarian Minister to the Holy See, Barcza, even Montgomery had also known about this; H. HARASZTI ÉVA, *Szerződészegők. Az angol-német flottaegyezmény* (Budapest 1972), 58.

³¹ OL KÜM K99 88/pol–1935 (June 8th, 1935).

³² The Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs.

³³ The German ambassador in Rome.

³⁴ OL KÜM K99 88/pol–1935 (June 8th, 1935).

It is a further question, however, whether the rapprochement of the two countries was inevitable or not, and so it is worth examining their motivations in brief. In the case of Italy, Mussolini probably knew that while there were operations in Africa, Italy would not be able to defend her interests in Europe concerning Austria. But did Mussolini really want to stand by Austria? As we know that the “Duce” planned a lightning war in Ethiopia, in the middle of 1935 he could have thought that he would be able to protect his positions in Central Europe and regard the German rapprochement as only transitional.³⁵

The motivations of Germany are not so easy to understand. It seems probable that Hitler realized that Italy would have to choose between Ethiopia and the protection of Austria, thus a lasting conflict could ease the German dictator’s *fait accompli* politics. Many signs indicate that the German leader was playing a dual game: on one hand he approached Italy, and on the other Germany sold arms to Ethiopia!³⁶ Hitler had felt that it was worth supporting Italy (even by transitional guarantees about Austria) since Mussolini had embarked upon the “redistribution of the world”.³⁷ At the same time, since the African war seemed unavoidable, the previous politics of Germany (to stampede Italy into a war) was useful; so they could initiate friendlier politics without any risk.

3. The Sanctions

The question of sanctions was the problem, which made the Italo–Ethiopian conflict global and also struck Hungary to the quick because of her friendly relations with Italy. From August, 1935 there had already been ambiguous signs that the League of Nations would condemn Italy mainly because of British pressure. On the other hand, it was quite evident that Italy would start the war at all costs.³⁸

³⁵ Ibid. This assumption is confirmed by the French-Italian agreement on the withdrawal of the troops stationed at the common border. These Italian military units were led to the Austrian border. On the other hand, France’s standpoint was ambiguous since they signed a treaty with the British in which the French allowed London the use of the military ports of Toulon and Bizerta. Thus, in other words, the French were seemingly forced to use double-dealing politics. ORMOS (1969) 391.

³⁶ Simultaneously there was an unusual friendly reception of the new Italian ambassador to Berlin (Attolico) and the shipment of arms worth 1.2 million marks to Ethiopia via Norway and Belgium! See BAER 226. (footnote 45) and 319–320.

³⁷ KISS ALADÁR, *Az olasz fasizmus története* (Budapest 1970) 229–230. Germany tried to entrap Ethiopia and Italy into war even earlier (at the end of 1934), when a German agent, Steffen has “advised the Emperor to attack before the preparations of the enemy were complete”. BAIRU TAFLA, *Ethiopia and Germany. Cultural, political and economic relations, 1871–1936* (Wiesbaden 1981), 141–142.

³⁸ BAER 244–303.

There is no sign of any activity regarding the Italo-Ethiopian dispute in Hungarian politics until August 1935. The first debate of the Hungarian government about this matter was on 6th of August at the usual council of ministers. Discussing the possibility that the European impact of the conflict could affect Hungary too, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kánya, stated that if the nations would have to take a stand in Geneva, it would not be absolutely crucial for Hungary to stand up for Mussolini.³⁹ The reactions of the Prime Minister (Gömbös) or his colleagues are unknown, although there was an early sign of their evolving dissent.

The Italian attack in Ethiopia started on October 3, 1935. The Hungarian minister in Rome, Villani, reported on this by phone early in the morning and later on he also sent his official written account.⁴⁰ In his report he had dealt with the question of the prospective sanctions and he suggested that Hungary would be exempt from voting because of its disarmed status.⁴¹ The Hungarian newspapers, without exception, reported on the military events in Ethiopia regularly and in detail.

The Committee of Thirteen of the League of Nations, which was dealing with the Italo–Ethiopian conflict on October 5, decided that Italy had no right to choose military intervention in Africa. Two days later it concluded with the new establishment of the Committee of Six declaring that Italy had committed an act of aggression and had urging economic sanctions in its recommendations.⁴² A general assembly was called to debate the issue.

In this situation the expulsion of Italy from the League of Nations arose as an alternative. There are certain signs suggesting that Italian diplomats in Budapest asked the Hungarian Prime Minister whether Hungary would also have left if Italy had done so.⁴³ Gömbös gave an evasive answer and Kánya, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, had promised that Hungary would vote against the sanctions, but rejected following Italy's conditional with-

³⁹ GERGELY JENŐ (ed.), *Antal István sajtófőnök emlékiratai* (Budapest 2003), 424. Antal István was the main public relations officer during the Gömbös-government.

⁴⁰ OL KÜM K99 153/pol–1935.

⁴¹ OL KÜM K99 152/pol–1935.

⁴² We have to make a distinction between two different votes. The first one was held on October 7, 1935 and the question it had to answer was whether Italy was guilty or not in the Wal–Wal incident. Most of the members voted *yes* except for Hungary. Two days later a more significant vote was held when they decided about Italy's responsibility, whether the country had behaved as an aggressor or not. Part of the relevant bibliography mixes these two events; see "Report of the League of Nations Council Committee", in: *The American Journal of International Law*, ser. 30, 1. Supplement: *Official Documents* (January 1936), 37–40.

⁴³ RÉTI (1998) 71–72.

drawal from the League.⁴⁴ It is known that from the beginning of September the Italian diplomacy in Budapest was working hard just to learn the Hungarian standpoint. Moreover, Mussolini directed Colonna (Italian ambassador to Budapest) to announce to the Hungarian Prime Minister that Italy expected Hungary's negative vote in the question of the sanctions.⁴⁵ But the decision was reached by the Hungarian diplomats after a long debate. The reason for this is in the different opinions of the Hungarian leaders: Miklós Horthy (Regent of Hungary, 1920–1944), Gyula Gömbös (Prime Minister, 1932–1936), Kálmán Kánya (Minister of Foreign Affairs, 1933–1938). As we will see later, during the two world wars it was almost impossible to discuss foreign policy matters in the Hungarian parliament or even in the Committee of Foreign Affairs. It was merely the privilege of the three statesmen mentioned.⁴⁶

Kálmán Kánya reacted sensitively to the British viewpoint. In September he thought that Hungary could only say “no” to the sanctions because of her Italian orientation. But after conversations with British diplomats he became convinced that despite these feelings, Hungary should say “yes” to the sanctions!⁴⁷ Following this, between October 3 and 7 (the exact date is unknown) at a council of ministers he made this new proposal to the Prime Minister but he could not manage to convince Gömbös of his viewpoint. What is more, Gömbös shouted at Kánya that “I would rather cut off my hands than sign such a decision”.⁴⁸ Kánya and Gömbös, thus, had to go to the Regent, Miklós Horthy. We have no detailed account of this audience but it seems to be sure that this was the first time that Kánya had threatened his resignation.⁴⁹ There are no documents about what happened at the audience between Horthy, Gömbös and Kánya, but presumably Horthy managed to make a compromise. We know Horthy's then standpoint from the report of the Italian ambassador in Budapest:

⁴⁴ ORMOS (1970) 102–103.

⁴⁵ Mussolini's telegram to Colonna. October 7, 1935. PChM 342.

⁴⁶ PRITZ PÁL, “Döntési folyamatok a magyar külpolitikában 1919–1944”, In: PRITZ PÁL, *A magyar diplomácia a két világháború között. Tanulmányok* (Budapest 1995), 225–233.

⁴⁷ One of the “diplomats” was C.A. Macartney, then English professor in Hungary, author of many books on Hungarian history.

⁴⁸ *Memoirs of Antal István* (manuscript in the Hungarian Academy of Science). Quoted in: RÉTI (1998) 71.

⁴⁹ PRITZ (1982) 234–235. To get a full picture we have to add that Kánya had already criticised the Italians before that since in his opinion the Ethiopian operation had not been prepared through diplomacy. Ibid. 233–234. Gömbös and Kánya had been in a tense relationship from May when they were opposed to each other over the question of the future Berlin minister.

The Governor, with whom two days ago I spent the afternoon at the Gödöllő mansion, spontaneously and most cordially expressed his accordance to the Italian attitude in the Ethiopian question.

He said that he absolutely understands the necessity of Italian expansion and the action planned by Your Excellency. Conversely he does not understand Great Britain's viewpoint and especially why she does not identify herself with a civilised great power that is against a 'coloured barbarism'. (sic! These are obviously Horthy's own words – Sz. B.) In his opinion it will be obvious after the defeat of the Negus, that opposition will be in vain and they [Ethiopians] will be 'satisfied' with nominal sovereignty, similar to that which the Sultan of Morocco was given by the French authorities. Nevertheless his confidence is that it was the best possible decision of Your Excellency to go ahead without taking into consideration England's opposition.⁵⁰

The Italian diplomat, Colonna, later added that other Hungarian politicians had begun to think the same way, and had overcome their early anguish (perhaps even Kánya did so). The cause of this – as Colonna wrote – was „the real and sincere hope that the present international situation will lead to the rapprochement and co-operation of Italy and Germany.”⁵¹ We have another source for Horthy's opinion, albeit it from his memoirs, written after WW II. Here he writes more moderately:

When these democracies reached for so-called sanctions because of the East African plans of Italy, they chased Germany and Italy into each other's arms. (...) We had no reasons to join these senseless sanctions. With this, of course, we got a bad mark from Eden.⁵²

According to the above quotations we conclude that Hungary's *abstention* from any sanction was the result of Horthy's compromise. In this case the decision was actually equal to the rejection of the sanctions, which meant that Gömbös was pleased with this solution (probably his point of view was shared by Horthy, too) and Kánya did not have to resign.

The hesitation in the question of the sanctions was made worse by another factor. The Hungarian standpoint (abstention) was introduced by Baron László Velics, the Hungarian representative at the League of Nations at the meeting in Geneva on October 9, 1935. But in the Hungarian National Archives, I found three versions of the speech. Keeping the chronology and following the mechanism of the Hungarian diplomacy, the first version was the

⁵⁰ Colonna to Mussolini. 28th August, 1935. PChM 330–331.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² HORTHY MIKLÓS, *Emlékirataim* (Budapest 1990), 177.

draft which told Velics what he was to say. Most of the time these drafts were delivered by a diplomatic courier or, in the case of great urgency, they were sent by telegraph. However, in this particular case an irregular and unusual process had been used: it was dictated by telephone from Budapest by Baron Gábor Apor (permanent deputy of the Minister of Foreign Affairs) and probably Velics himself noted it down. This fact itself is proof of the late decision making by Hungary. As was mentioned, Kánya informed the Italian diplomats about the decision only on October 8 but it seems that he did so because he was not convinced and not because he wanted to keep it secret. As the voting was held on October 9, the telephone seemed to be the only solution. It is striking, however, that this version contained “no” to the question of the sanctions!⁵³ The reason for this is not known, and so again we can only guess what happened. It seems possible that it was the private action of Gömbös (and not Apor supposedly), who tried to hinder the decision at the last minute because of his fears of losing the Italian friendship (he might have consulted with Italian diplomats, too).⁵⁴

The second version of the speech is almost identical with the first, only some lines were re-written by Velics (the decision itself has not been changed). This means that there were perhaps hours, when the text of the Hungarian decision was already in Geneva, with a “no” at the end. However, we don’t know how the “no” was changed again into *abstention*. The third version is the actual speech, which was delivered at the assembly, and on the evening of the same day, October 9, was sent back to Budapest by telegraph.⁵⁵

The abstention of Hungary from the sanctions was explained as follows:

Concerning the economic sanctions, Hungary is in an interesting situation. Many of the resolutions of the League of Nations, which concerned Article 16 of the Covenant, took measures by paying attention to the special demands and conditions of each of the countries. It is

⁵³ OL KÜM K107 75. Cs. 1028/1935. All three versions of the speech can be found under this code. The end of the ‘Apor-version’ is the following (originally in French): “Not being in a situation when all the facts and documents, which would reason the adoption of the serious resolutions, could have been examined with close attention and full consciousness, my country, following moral principles, votes with no.”

⁵⁴ It seemed to be confirmed as Antal recollected badly in his memoirs (manuscript). He remembers that Gömbös was the one who dictated the text. Although it is clear from the archive documents that it was Apor, Antal’s bad memory implies Gömbös’s responsibility. See: RÉTI (1998) 71. Months later Gömbös stated (to Colonna) that he had not even previously read the text! PChM 359.

⁵⁵ That is why we do not know the whole of the official text. The *Journal Officiel*, the official publication of the League of Nations, did not publish Velics’s full speech unlike other representatives’ views.

possible that the sanctions would cause damage in the participating countries, which could cause serious consequences later on. Thus, it seems that a certain scope for movement should be left for the states in order they could fulfil the aims of the League. There is no one but the Council who knows better the financial and economic difficulties of Hungary. The exclusion of Italy from the already limited and narrow markets would cause the total upset of the Hungarian financial and economic balance. This balance was possible only with Italian exports.

This part of the speech covers the reality. The economic situation of the countries in the Danube basin was becoming worse because of the Great Depression. Their debts were growing gradually, for instance because of the lack of mutual relationships. However, there were two significant commercial agreements (the Hungarian–German and the Hungarian–Italian–Austrian ones) of which the German one was more important concerning the whole Hungarian economy, but Italy remained one of the biggest markets for agricultural products, on which the Hungarian economy was based.⁵⁶ Furthermore, in Velics’s speech we can find phrases, which tried to argue by the Hungarian–Italian bonds of friendship and the country’s revisionist claims:

A nation’s life does not exist within rigid, static frames but following the disciplines given by nature, it is constantly moving. The basic task of the League of Nations is to oversee that this process can happen on the basis of regulating terms.

The declaration of a definite Hungarian standpoint regarding the sanctions was disclaimed by these words:

I ask the question whether this is the case when those sanctions have to be imposed which are to be used in cases of obvious aggression as an *ultima ratio*. It is not the Hungarian government that should give an answer to this question.⁵⁷

The abstention was practically equal to standing by Italy. Because of this, then and later on, Hungary was criticised by the “sanctionist” states. Samuel Hoare telegraphed to Edmond, head of the British delegation to the League of Nations, that “if it is indeed true that Hungary will take no part

⁵⁶ RÉTI (1998) 42–46.

⁵⁷ Hungary thus abstained from the voting together with Austria and Albania. There was a legal possibility to do that, though the text of the *Covenant* was ambiguous. According to this, it was compulsory to take part in the sanctions if all the states agreed on the guiltiness of the accused country. Contemporary anti-sanctionist explanations are MENGELE FERENC, *A Népszövetség jogi és politikai rendszere* (Budapest 1927), 258–274 and 381–382, and FILIPPUCCI-GIUSTINIANI, *A szankciók joga* = *Külügyi Szemle* ser. 14, 1936, 264–276.

at all in any kind of League action, she will obviously be a disloyal member of the League and will have to bear her full share of the responsibility.”⁵⁸ Later on, Sir G. Knox, newly appointed British minister to Budapest was ordered to “make very heavy weather” in the Hungarian capital. He discussed the matter with the Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kánya, who told him that “Hungary had no wish to oppose [the League] and had many reasons for being grateful”, but Hungary “would run grave economic risks by imposing sanctions on Italy.”⁵⁹ It is undoubtedly true that, since export of grain to Italy was forbidden by the sanctions, it would have caused a great deficiency in the budget if Hungary had joined the fifty countries voting for the sanctions.⁶⁰

Mussolini expressed his gratitude to Hungary for its behaviour in the League of Nations, at least verbally. On October 11 László Szabó, the Hungarian military attaché in Rome, visited the “Duce” on the occasion of the regular audience, which we know of from the report he sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. According to the attaché Mussolini said:

Please inform His Excellency GÖMBÖS that I appreciate his best wishes especially at this crucial point and I thank him. – Please inform the members of the HUNGARIAN ARMY, of whom I have a high opinion, that the declaration of their solidarity at the time of the endeavour of their Italian comrades serves as new proof of that friendship that will lead to the fulfilment of Hungarian claims. [...] I have been working for thirty years, asking, begging, threatening legitimately to ensure room for the population of Italy [...] – I want these poor masses to eat at least once a day because today they eat only once and not enough. – What I wanted to produce from this land by bonification, I did. – It does not work anymore. There is no place for the Italian worker in Tunis; in France and in America the Italian masses do not find work. In our colonies we have the first crop from a wretched olive-tree in 15–20 years if we sacrifice millions. I want land or otherwise we shall explode. – Thus when I had obtained a free hand from LAVAL I acted. – There is no stopping here. – [...] Nobody who knows my claims can accuse me of starting to believe in this principle just today. – I always said that Europe can be saved from extreme danger only by just treaties [...] You Hungarians are getting closer to your

⁵⁸ W.N. MEDICLOTT, etc. (eds.), *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919–1939* (= DBFP) (London 1976), 64 (Document No. 54).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 65., in the footnote.

⁶⁰ It deserves attention that Egypt has also joined the sanctions, though the country was not a member of the League.

aims with this step because Europe, willy–nilly, has to find other, healthier ways to go on. – You have to feel that I always support you. A new horizon opens up to you!⁶¹

The quotation speaks for itself. For us those parts are interesting which promise the satisfaction of Hungarian claims. There are certain historical sources that refer to the fact that Mussolini had prepared for a quick (if not a lightning) war though the general staff called his attention to the possibility of a longer war which was also confirmed by Hungarian military analysis.⁶² It was obvious that Mussolini could not fulfil his European promises in these circumstances, though he kept on saying that the presence of Italian troops in Africa did not influence Italy’s European military forces. Besides this, in connection with the above quotation, it is worth calling attention to the point that the Italian leader again confirmed: he had obtained a “free hand” from Laval. If this statement were not true he would not have a reason to say something untrue to the Hungarian military attaché.

There are certain references that suggest also that the Hungarian intelligence service was used by the Italian military leadership to map the British military forces in Egypt. The close relationship between the “Duce” and the Hungarian military attaché in Rome was more intimate than between Mussolini and other diplomats.⁶³ What is more, the Hungarian–Egyptian connection was quite warm and friendly in these years (even the question of an agreement of friendship was once mentioned in the Egyptian press). There was also an important group of Hungarians in Egypt, which had significant economic interests, too.⁶⁴ Thus, if Mussolini wanted to complete the information given by the Italian spies – who were obviously followed by an “army” of secret agents – he could use the Hungarian connections.

As it was mentioned before, the Western countries together with nations of the Little Entente criticised Hungary because of the abstentions. This was the cause for further explanations by important personalities of Hungarian public life. Following Velics’s speech at the meeting in Geneva, Ferenc Herczeg, one of the most popular writers of the era and also the president of the Revisionist League in Hungary, was the first to argue for the abstentions in the *Pesti Hírlap* (Newspaper of Pest).⁶⁵ In his writing he addressed foreign countries, so the paper was also published in several lan-

⁶¹ OL KÜM K100–1936.

⁶² DIÓSZEGI ISTVÁN, *A hatalmi politika másfél évszázada* (Budapest 1997), 385.

⁶³ OL KÜM K100 63/47 k.a. and several documents from IHht.

⁶⁴ KOMAR KRISZTIAN, *Hungarian–Egyptian Interwar Relations* = *Etudes sur la région Méditerranéenne*, vol. XII (Szeged 2003), 75–83.

⁶⁵ Ferenc Herczeg (1863–1954) one of the most famous Hungarian playwrights and authors of this era.

guages and was distributed in the larger cities of Europe. Herczeg tried to support the Hungarian decision in Geneva with moral arguments, using his writing skills as a prolific author:

We think that it is necessary for us to throw some light on the reasons which have forced Hungary to take this and no other decision. We will begin with a statement that the political outlook of the Hungarian nation has for many years been directed by a desire for the alteration of the Peace Treaty of Trianon. This is an aim, which is shared both by the government and by every Hungarian citizen. Hungarians are chiefly interested in world events from the point of view of whether they forward or retard these national aims. Therefore it is natural that this Italian–Abyssinian conflict should also be regarded from this angle. [...]

Until now there has been only one Great Power whose government has openly and solemnly taken up as one of its national aims the reparation of injustices inflicted on Hungary. The nations, in sad periods of their history, are susceptible to declarations of sympathy and it is quite natural that the brave and noble stand taken by the Italian Government has linked Hungary to Italy with ties of gratitude and affection.

When Hungary took up her attitude in Geneva with regard to sanctions she had no free choice but was obliged to take her place by the side of Italy. She was prompted by the voice of her own conscience and acted in accordance with the unanimous sentiment of the whole Hungarian nation. It is morally impossible to desire sanctions against the only state, which has taken as its aim the liberation of Hungary from her unbearable situation.

This is the real reason for Hungary's attitude at Geneva. The economic considerations raised at Geneva, compared with these moral reasons, are unimportant.⁶⁶

After the publication of this article, the reactions of foreign states were reported on regularly in the *Pesti Hírlap*. From these we know that sometimes the article made things even worse and evoked just the opposite feeling. Western public opinion (and mainly that of the left) was not sensitive to such *emotional* politics and did not really understand the connection between the question of the sanctions and Hungarian revisionism, though from the aspect of Hungarian foreign policy it made sense.⁶⁷ However, Hun-

⁶⁶ HERCZEG FERENC, *Magyarország Genfben* = *Pesti Hírlap*, October 15, 1935 and off-prints in French, Italian and English.

⁶⁷ The French and the British were also in an embarrassing situation since they had signed an agreement with Italy at Stresa in the same year, in April. The reporter of the *Pesti*

gary was quite embarrassed by the reluctant decision over the question of the sanctions; it was still a fact that one of the victorious countries of the Great War, which had good relations with Hungary, had started the rearrangement. From the Hungarian point of view, this was one of the illusory messages of the war, which was also confirmed in the quoted statement of Mussolini: “willy–nilly, Europe should find other healthy roads to walk on”.

In the Hungarian Parliament the question arose twice, apart from Dezső Rupert’s undelivered but scheduled interpellation in the Hungarian Parliament.⁶⁸ Count Móric Esterházy, former Prime Minister, was the first to rise to speak the next day after the publication of Herczeg’s article. He said:

I entirely share the point of view that foreign questions should be thrashed out before the Committee of Foreign Affairs⁶⁹, [but] I think that there are questions and situations when this committee is not the forum before which official statements should be brought. [...] In my modest opinion, the natural conclusions of the Italian–Abyssinian conflict and the future economic and international conclusions of these make it a question of life or death for Hungary. Our government should analyze our economic, political and geographical situation and avoid every statement, step and attitude in order not to bring disadvantage on Hungary.⁷⁰

The left wing, of course, fully agreed with him, though Esterházy, was not the typical representative of this side. Kálmán Kánya, the minister of foreign

Hírlap, for example, wrote the following from Geneva: “the reporters of the leftist papers had talked to me as if the disappearance of the whole right wing would depend on the Hungarian decision at Geneva. They are so biased in their political views that they did not even want to read Ferenc Herczeg’s article. The reporters of the right, however, were pleased to hear about the Italian friendly standpoint and they only objected because of the linking of this attitude with Hungarian revision.” TAMÁS ANDRÁS, *Herczeg Ferenc cikke Genfben* = *Pesti Hírlap*, October 22nd, 1935.

⁶⁸ The interpellation of Dezső Rupert (summarized in five points) would probably have been the bravest defence of Hungarian sanction politics since it refuted the Italian politics of expansion and the Hungarian standpoint in the question of the sanctions. This case informs us that the media tried to be *gleichgeschaltet* concerning Ethiopia, which was obviously successful. Under unknown circumstances the government managed to hinder the speech of Rupert. PRITZ (1982) 237–238.

⁶⁹ Between the two World Wars, questions on foreign policy were not debated openly in the Hungarian Parliament, nor in the Committee of Foreign Affairs. Foreign policy matters were discussed usually between only the Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and their secretaries and occasionally the governor. PRITZ (1995) 225–233.

⁷⁰ *Az Országgyűlés képviselőházi naplója*, 1935, Vol 3, pp. 302–304.

affairs, in his answer, made clear that foreign questions were still not to be debated publicly with the representatives. In the last part of the answer he emphasized the friendly relationship with Italy because of “serious rational reasons”, which probably meant economic arguments. Finally, he expressed his hope that “they will manage to protect Europe from further complications.”⁷¹ Esterházy thanked and acknowledged the answer.

It seems that the Hungarian policy makers were quite narrow-minded and too careful which is also supported by the fact that in 1935 it was impossible to debate foreign affairs in the Hungarian parliament. Károly Peyer (leader of the social democrats), who was the second to rise to speak in the dilemma over sanctions, also mentioned this problem. He was anxious mostly because of the foreign press, which “represented the Hungarian nation as an uncultured, inferior nation, which does not want to fulfil its international duties.”⁷² Because of this, he claimed it gave the right to each of the parties to state publicly their opinion in parliament. He also criticised the Prime Minister for a speech, held a few days before, in which Gömbös accused the League of Nations of not being impartial. In Peyer’s opinion it was inadvisable to say such things because they could turn the pro-Hungarian part of British public opinion against Hungary.⁷³ He was the only person to question publicly the Hungarian decision in Geneva when in his speech he qualified it as “not a really suitable viewpoint.”

A few days later Count István Bethlen, the former Prime Minister and one of the most outstanding politicians of the era, went public after a long period of silence. His opinion deserves attention from many aspects. On the one hand, the Hungarian–Italian Treaty of Friendship was signed in 1927, during his ten-year prime ministry (1921–1931) and his principles provided the basis of Hungarian foreign policy during Gömbös’s leadership, too. On the other hand, from the middle of the thirties on, he was the one who favoured British orientation for Hungary. Furthermore, Bethlen was the best known Hungarian politician abroad (perhaps apart from Horthy) and, naturally, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was aware of this fact. Thus it is not surprising that various diplomatic issues were often given to him, al-

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² *Az Országgyűlés képviselőházi naplója*, vol. 3 (1935), 387–388.

⁷³ Peyer’s fears were right since the problem of those countries which abstained from the sanctions arose in the British House of Commons three times and also Attlee, the future Prime Minister mentioned it; *Parliament Debates*, House of Commons, vol. 305 (1935), 89, 92, 115. Lord Cranborne told Velics, head of the Hungarian delegation in Geneva “that nations which took up such an attitude on this occasion must expect it to affect the view of the League towards them in the future.” DBFP document no. 52, footnote.

though officially he did not belong to the Hungarian diplomatic corps. But if only because of his warm feelings towards Britain, it would be a mistake to expect a different opinion from him about the Hungarian decision in Geneva. The cause of his pronouncement on this matter was probably that he might have felt the arguments of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (and of Herczeg) to be precarious. So he tried to protect the Hungarian standpoint from another new point of view.

As was mentioned earlier, the official statement in Geneva had an economic approach and Herczeg tried to argue from the emotional/moral side of the decision. In spite of this, Bethlen, who was an expert in international law and also the system of the League of Nations, approached the question from the *political* side. He started with making it clear that the principle of Hungarian foreign policy was the preservation of peace, since according to the Trianon Peace Treaty, Hungary had no army at that time. He maintained that the Covenant of the League of Nations was based on three principles: (1) respecting the sovereignty of all the states, (2) general and proportional disarmament and (3) the revision of those “treaties, which have become inapplicable”.⁷⁴

This last expression refers to *Article 19* of the Covenant, which would enable the peaceful arrangement of borders and, because of this, meant hope for Hungarian revisionist claims. As the principles state – wrote Bethlen – they are worth just as much as their practical use. He also claimed that these principles were valid only together because “a peace policy of the kind just described not only fails to further such a compromise, but actually proves an obstacle calculated to delay the materialisation of peace and even to make it illusory.”⁷⁵ Because of this, in Bethlen’s opinion, the sixteen-year work of the League was really dreadful since neither of these principles had been fulfilled. Naturally, the ignorance of *Article 19* troubles him most:

The whole world has refused to hear of the possibility of a revision of the unjust and intolerable conditions at present in existence. The greatest care was shown in avoiding even the determination of the signification and of the conditions of application of Article 19 and the final drafting of the relevant rules of procedure; indeed, those who – like we

⁷⁴ Bethlen’s article (“Hungary and the League of Nations”) was published in the *Pesti Hírlap* in Hungarian, and later in the monthly *Danubian Review* (November of 1935) along with another article, as an off-print, titled “Two Studies” in early 1936. The English version was translated by Dr. Arthur B. Yolland, then professor of English literature at the University of Budapest.

⁷⁵ STEPHEN BETHLEN, “Hungary And The League Of Nations”, In: *Two Studies* (Budapest 1936) 3–12.

Hungarians – presumed merely to mention the Article 19 were exposed to direct persecution and open threat; and we are pointed at as being unruly elements. [...] Many provisions of the treaties of peace have actually been subjected to a revision since they were ratified, – but only via facti (in the form of *fait accomplis* brought about by Germany), however as a result of procedure in no single case carried out within the League itself under Article 19 of the Covenant, such an issue being successfully and carefully avoided for fear of establishing a precedent.⁷⁶

Bethlen shared the opinion that the biggest mistake of the League of Nations' system was its rigidity because it did not allow any change: "the world is not static but is subject to evolution and that a certain scope must be given to the play of the dynamic forces, as also that no peace work can be lasting which does not rest on elastic foundations." According to Bethlen, without the involvement of the defeated countries, the victorious states "set to work, to the exclusion of the defeated countries, to make so-called 'mutual assistance' agreements with one another, [however] these agreements being in reality nothing more or less than the old defensible alliances in a League of Nations dress."⁷⁷ On the other hand, he found a deficiency in the question of the sanctions with which he tried to protect Italy and Hungary. Namely, *Article 15* of the Covenant says that the decision of the Council of the League is obligatory only if all the members have accepted it. In the case of a simple majority the members could keep their freedom in the decision-making, which, in Bethlen's interpretation, could mean, "they may even go to war."⁷⁸ One part of his article focused specifically on the abstentions of Hungary from the sanctions:

Little Hungary⁷⁹ – one of the defeated States – in her passive struggle against the Danube Pact, proposed by the Little Entente and against the system of collective "sanctions", was not guided by any hidden intention of preparing for some warlike adventure; what really underlay her action was the simple, logical consideration, that if in a

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ To see it clearly, we have to lay the fact that the guilt of Italy was not unambiguous for an outsider and it was proved only after the Second World War. The cause of this was that many people believed in Ethiopia's increased potentials and they were afraid of a possible attack against the Italian colonies. It is a fact, however, that Ethiopia was looking for an exit to the Red Sea and to get it they were satisfied with the argumentation that Italy only prevents the Ethiopian aggression – thus they act in the name of the preservation of peace.

⁷⁹ An often used word to name the Hungarian state after the Trianon Peace Treaty.

treaty undertaken voluntarily she acknowledged and guaranteed her neighbours the frontiers allotted them in the Treaty of Trianon, she would be once for all renouncing all claims to have those frontiers changed by peaceful means too, while by spontaneously consenting to the securing of the status quo by all and every conceivable means, she would herself voluntarily remove from the minds of the parties on the other side the last psychological cause calculated to persuade them at any time to consent to the putting into practice of Article 19 of the Covenant of the League of Nations. [...] No nation in the world would be prepared to deny itself or its conviction to that extent. Should any Government decide to take a step of the kind, the indignation of the public opinion of the country would immediately sweep it out of existence. Or, a Government making promises to that effect for the future would be acting in all faith, giving undertakings which it knew it would be unable in any given case to fulfil.⁸⁰

These words adhere to such sharp logic that it is worthless adding anything else to them. However, it is not pointless to ponder the question whether Hungary could have had any possibility for a compromise, which would enable the country to maintain the claim for changing the *status quo* without rejecting participation in the sanctions. In my opinion the answer to this question is an unequivocal *no* and the reasons for this can be found in the argumentation of Bethlen's articles and in Velics's speech in Geneva. The last part of Bethlen's article, subtitled "Peace politics heading for war" claims that to maintain the peace, *Article 19* should be used, i.e. the peace treaties should be revised at last:

The idea of collective security is inseparable from the possibility of a revision based upon Article 19 of the Covenant [...] If that is done Hungary will undoubtedly be the foremost champion of the idea of collective security [...] until the situation changes, it is of vital interest to Hungary that she should reserve her liberty in respect of all and every kind of collective „sanction” [...] Such a peace policy must sooner or later lead to bloody conflicts and to war.⁸¹

What we should add to this is the fact if Hungary had given her 'yes' vote at Geneva not only would she have lost her most significant market but also her only ally. In that case the total political isolation of Hungary would have been induced as it was before 1927. It is obvious that loyalty to the League of Nations was not worth so much in 1935.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

4. The End of the Conflict

In December 1935 the Hungarian general staff was ready with its regular annual summary of the military situation of the country. The memorandum pointed to the most significant international events of the year such as the regicide in Marseille, the re-armament of Germany and the Italo–Ethiopian conflict. Concerning the latter the document claimed that:

The further consequences of these events cannot be seen yet, however, we can state that they have brought important changes both in the politics of Europe and of the world:

1. That stability which was thought to be unshakable and which was a typical feature of the European political situation maintained by the absolute power of the victorious states, is now disappearing.
2. The politics of the League of Nations is at a critical period and so is the principle of so-called ‘collective securité’, too.
3. Political alliances reappear again, though still within the dress of the League of Nations.
4. The states of Europe – mostly without exception – have become the participants in a powerful competition for armament.

[...] Since the revisionist powers now have an increasing potential for war, it can easily take place an occasion, which serves with the hope of success from any reason, would lead to the military solution of the question.⁸²

In Chapter V, titled ‘*The Politics of the Revisionist Group*’ the memorandum deals with Germany which “has increased her international importance with the immense organization of her inner resources and also with such successful steps in foreign policy [...] Germany is on the right track to become a leading European state again [...] It could be crucial for the future of Hungary to realize and analyse German ambitions and goals.” The general staff, however, was not really content with the idea of Germany’s rising again since as they wrote “the vicinity of the German empire with 70 million people is not desirable for us”, referring to the Anschluss. And furthermore: “At the moment German connections are irreconcilable with Hungarian–Italian friendship. [...] A German alliance [...] also means that we want to reach our political goals with the use of military forces. This fact does not mean either advantage, or disadvantage regarding our present position”.⁸³

⁸² IHht 348–359.

⁸³ Ibid.

The interpretation of these lines is not easy. In my opinion the document was worded intentionally opaquely by the military leaders. Whatever they wanted to disclose, it can be surely stated that the question of Hungarian revision and the foreign policy of the country got into a desperate situation; Italy was confronted with the League and thus “there is no chance of peaceful revision.”⁸⁴ On the other hand, it is logical that Hungary did not have the potential to start a military conflict in her disarmed state. The possible alliance with Germany, which would have meant the undertaking of military action with the help of the National Socialists, did not promise too much since Germany was inclined to support the revisionist claims only against Czechoslovakia.⁸⁵

As was mentioned earlier, Hungary received strong criticism from the countries instituting the sanctions. They started to emphasize the point that Hungary was profiting from the economic boycott by seizing better market positions in Italy. These accusations were primarily made by the states of the Little Entente and Titulescu, the Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, once claimed:

While in Romania there is no chance in the future to exchange the country's timber, corn, animals for Italian products, Italy is going to buy these goods in Hungary and Austria as both countries are going to receive Italian goods. Once more, Romania has decided to fulfil the relevant points of the Covenant on the part of the United Kingdom and France. However, it should be seen that the system which has been set aside will be favourable for both Hungary and Austria, who have violated Article 16 of the Covenant. Though Italy will stop the import of timber from Yugoslavia, she will be provided by Hungary. Though Italy will cease to receive import of animals from Romania and Yugoslavia, but Hungary will export them, just like grain, as well.⁸⁶

The accusations were without any doubt valid. But to be historically correct it has to be mentioned that almost every country tried to profit from the situation. It was clear from the very beginning of the conflict that Italy would need extra import of oil. We have information about greatly *in-*

⁸⁴ Naturally, Mussolini was continuing to feed Hungary with this, moreover he even held out the prospect of it.

⁸⁵ ORMOS (1998) 157–158.

⁸⁶ In: Société des Nations, *Journal Officiel*, Supplément Spécial, No. 145, 39. Titulescu later, in a private conversation with the Italian ambassador to Bucharest fulminated: “those pigs [...] forced us to plunge our fingers into the *pot de merde* [sic!], now let them drink all its content”. OL KÜM K63 23/41. 93/pol.–szám.

creased oil cargos from Romania and the Soviet Union from the official report of the Hungarian minister in Rome in December 1935.⁸⁷ However, the Soviet Union, which was the newest member of the League of Nations, was among those countries which were in favour of stricter sanctions against Italy.⁸⁸ To get the full picture of the situation the fact has to be considered that the sanctions which took effect on November 18th 1935 were accepted by the parliaments of the states only later on or were not even ratified by them.⁸⁹ To that extent it was pointless to urge the escalation of the sanctions since nobody took them seriously. Thus the spring of 1936 passed with endless debates in the League while the Italians came closer and closer to victory in Ethiopia.

Thus the so-called ‘oil-sanctions’ were never brought into effect probably because Mussolini would have provoked a war in the Mediterranean and in this case, as the Hungarian minister to Rome had initially stated, “he [Mussolini] would have been ready to pay for German support.”⁹⁰ However, the Italian leader was always aware of the fact that he could not compete with Great Britain on the sea. That is why the old plan of attacking Yugoslavia became a focus of interest in the summer of 1936, while Italian operations were still going on in Ethiopia. Obviously this plan was only a diversion, pretending that Italy was still a great power in Europe.⁹¹ But the Hungarian Prime Minister Gömbös, who was formerly an unconditional fan of Mussolini, decided already at least in March of 1936. Preziosi, Italian minister to Vienna wrote to Mussolini on March 16th, 1936, on the occasion of the Austrian statesman’s visit to the Hungarian capital: “Gömbös – although he seemed to be still the organizer of a North-South block [i.e. the Axis] – has shown such an affection for Germany, that supposedly if he should choose between Rome and Berlin, he would obviously choose the latter.”⁹²

On July 15th all the sanctions were cancelled and the step itself also meant the end of the conflict within the League of Nations. However, the legaliza-

⁸⁷ OL KÚM K99 132/pol–1935.

⁸⁸ ORMOS (1969) 389. See MAXIME LITVINOV, *Les causes principales de l’insuccès de l’application des Art. 10 et 16 du Covenant de la S.D.N.* = *Revue de Droit International* (1936), 104–112.

⁸⁹ There are only five countries that never recognized the annexion of Ethiopia, namely the US, the Soviet Union, Mexico, New Zealand and China; CHRISTINE SANDFORD, *Ethiopia under Hailé Selassié* (London 1946), 103.

⁹⁰ ORMOS (1970) 113.

⁹¹ OL KÚM K100–11–VI–13. (June 13th, 1936)

⁹² Preziosi, Italian minister in Vienna, to Mussolini. 1936. március 19. PChM 371. It is clear from this document that if the Berlin–Rome axis had not come into existence, Hungary would have chosen Germany.

tion of Italian expansion failed to come about because of the Emperor, who claimed (and he could even prove it) that there were still troops fighting in his country and even the Ethiopian government was functioning.⁹³ After the surrender of the Ethiopian executive power, Hungary and Austria were the first to recognize the new Italian Empire in Africa. They did so, however, after they had obtained leaked information from the Swiss government that the Council intended to come to the same decision.⁹⁴ Though Hailé Selassié officially protested before the League, the decision could not be stopped.⁹⁵

Another observation can be drawn from the war between Italy and Ethiopia: the poor quality of Italian military equipment. In the first half of the thirties Italy had a reputation for being a great air power. Not only were her aeroplanes known worldwide but also the skills of her pilots. The first experiment of the Italian air force in action was in Ethiopia. Though the Italian authorities tried everything to keep outsiders away from the military operations, it did not escape the attention of analysts that the Italian aeroplanes lacked any improvement and by 1935–1936 they had become obsolete.⁹⁶ Vittorio Mussolini, the dictator's younger son, who fought in Ethiopia as a pilot, was enthusiastic about the Italian planes. However, he mentions in his account that the Italian airplanes were very often shot down by simple rifles; moreover, it happened many times that the Ethiopians managed to shoot even the pilots themselves from the mountain tops.⁹⁷

The performance of the Italian airplanes did not convince the Hungarian generals either, who had ordered 26 Italian made planes before the start of the war in 1935. The deadline for the delivery was put off again and again because of the war and finally, the Hungarians lost patience and decided to order new planes but this time modernized German ones.⁹⁸ The weakness of the Italian military forces was an open secret in Hungarian military cir-

⁹³ This statement was true. The final regular troops and the general headquarters of the Ethiopian government were eradicated up only in the end of 1936 and the beginning of 1937. The guerilla warfare, however, carried on and needed about 100 thousand Italian soldiers; HAROLD G. MARCUS, *A History of Ethiopia* (Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 1994) 147–152 and SANDFORD 88–105.

⁹⁴ SANDFORD 99.

⁹⁵ The pressmark of the objection is MOL OL KÜM K107–1936 XX/1.

⁹⁶ The bibliography regards the Spanish civil war the event when the obsolescence of Italian equipment had been realized all around the world. In my opinion, however, this could have already been seen in Ethiopia and Spain and just confirmed it. KENNEDY 278.

⁹⁷ Mussolini n.d. In the book there can be seen a picture of one of the planes used in action, riddled with bullets.

⁹⁸ CSIMA JÁNOS, *Olaszország szerepe a Horthy-hadsereg fegyverkezésében, 1920–1941* = *Hadtörténeti Közlemények*, vol. 2 (1969), 289–313.

cles, since they had firsthand information. Colonel József Németh was sent to the Ethiopian front as a military observer, and he spent a month there along with his Albanian, Japanese, Austrian and American colleagues. His return to Hungary happened under scandalous circumstances, because his reports sent to Hungary were intolerable to the Italians, who asked the Hungarian government to recall the colonel.⁹⁹ But the scandal continued. Once returned to Budapest, colonel Németh gave an exclusive lecture at the Hungarian National Military Officers' Club, and spoke openly about his experiences. However the details of the lecture were leaked to Italian diplomatic ears. There was nothing to do other than to ask the colonel to write a long and pro-Italian article for the Hungarian Military Review about the “glorious victory of Fascism”, which he did.¹⁰⁰

5. Conclusion

Some Hungarian historians (especially before 1990, but sometimes even today) tend to consider Hungary as an “ab ovo” ally of Nazi Germany. But Hungary was in a disarmed position due to the Trianon Treaty, and in consequence she was looking for a peaceful way of revision. Italy seemed to be a solution: as a victorious great power of World War I, potentially and sometimes actually, Italy could promote Hungarian aims on the international field: at the League of Nations. This Hungarian conception was toppled by the Italo–Ethiopian conflict. The trepidity of Hungarian foreign policy shows unambiguously that the Hungarians tried to find a way out of this deadlock. However, they could not decide well: with their abstention they provoked the sanctionist states and even Italy, as a belligerent country, could not tolerate the peaceful Hungarian ambitions.

During the conflict it became clear that if Italy spent too much time in Africa, she would not be able to prevent the Anschluss. If so, Hitler would expand German power towards Central Europe. As a consequence, thanks to the Italo–Ethiopian conflict, Germany and Italy made up to each other, which was the dream of some Hungarian politicians. But their vision was good relations between two equal powers: the Hungarian Prime Minister of this era, Gömbös, would have liked to get the support of Italy and Germany together, in equal balance. Although the “Axis” was realised, the Af-

⁹⁹ Antal István sajtófőnök emlékiratai. In: RÉTI (1998) 424–425.

¹⁰⁰ See about the scandal KÁDÁR GYULA, *A Ludovikától Sopronköhidáig* (Budapest 1978), 278–279. The colonel's article: NÉMETH JÓZSEF, *Az olasz–abesszín háború* = Magyar Katonai Szemle, vol. 6 (1936), 1–230. I assumed that there would be a hand-written version of the colonel's report, but unfortunately there is nothing about this matter in the Hungarian Military Archives (I am thankful to archivist Lenkefi Ferenc).

rican war resulted in an unequal alliance: Italy (at least in Central Europe) ceased to be a great power. This consequence was disastrous for Hungary: due to Mussolini's African war Hungary fell into Hitler's sphere of interest, not only economically but politically too.

Abbreviations

- Cs. = a fond in the Hungarian National Archives (as "csomó")
DBFP = see MEDICLOTT in the bibliography
IHht = see HETÉS in the bibliography
K = foreign affairs' documents in the Hungarian National Archives (as "külügy")
KÜM = documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Hungarian National Archives (as "Külügyminisztérium")
OL = the Hungarian National Archives (as "Országos Levéltár")
PChM = see RÉTI (2003) in the bibliography
Pol. = political documents in the Hungarian National Archives
Res. = reserved documents in the Hungarian National Archives
WsM = see RÁNKI (1968) in the bibliography

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Summary

Between the two World Wars the main policy of Hungarian diplomacy was the possible revision of the Trianon Peace Treaty. Until 1935 they believed in a peaceful way under the aegis of the League of Nations with the help of Italy. The Italo–Ethiopian conflict, however, totally disrupted these plans. Although the Hungarian political elite tried to stand by Mussolini, their abstention from the sanctions indicated a changed direction toward Germany and militarism. This study, using unpublished Hungarian archival sources, reveals the inner struggles of the desperate Hungarian government.