

## **Hungarian Foreign Minister Kálmán Kánya, Hitler, and Peace in Europe, August - September, 1938\***

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Kálmán Kánya was the “grand old man” of Hungarian foreign affairs between 1933 and 1945. As an Austro-Hungarian diplomatic official, his career commenced as early as 1893, at as diverse locations as Constantinople, Kiev, Vienna, and Mexico City. At the end of the First World War, Kánya returned to his native Hungary, where he had a major share in establishing the independent Hungarian diplomatic service. During a long span of political activity, he played a role, for example, in blocking King Károly’s return to the Hungarian throne in 1921 and participated in formulating the terms of the intended Hungarian armistice with Stalin in 1944. He reached the height of his career as foreign minister during 1933-1938, a position he fulfilled with vigor, despite his sixty-three years of age at the time of his appointment. During 1919-1925, Kánya served as deputy foreign minister and was the Hungarian representative in Berlin from 1925 until 1933.<sup>1</sup>

Kánya was blessed with a well developed intellect, which was tempered with a healthy spirit of realism. He was also a man of determination and courage, yet a sense of caution seldom deserted him. As foreign minister, he employed his talents for maintaining his small and truncated Hungary’s security, during the overlapping eras of French-Little Entente dominance and Germany’s ascendancy under Hitler. As his most ambitious undertaking, he attempted to build a multilateral grand alliance consisting of Hungary, Germany, Italy, Austria, and perhaps Poland, with which he intended to strengthen Hungary’s security and thereby to advance the cause of Hungarian irredentism also, hoping in the process to reverse the territorial decisions of the Treaty of Trianon. Though his grand alliance proved to be beyond the realm of the possible, Kánya continued on a course of measured Hungarian-

German friendship, though far from unreservedly so, and he persisted in efforts toward territorial revisionism. It is in these regards that Kánya became the crucial Hungarian figure in the events that transpired during August-September, 1938, between Hungary and the Little Entente at Bled, and almost simultaneously, between Hungary and Germany in Kiel and Berlin.

Both sets of these events were closely associated with the Czechoslovak crisis of 1938, culminating in the four-power Munich Conference. During the tumultuous weeks of August and September, Hitler attempted to lure Hungary into participating in a military attack on Czechoslovakia, possibly a quite disastrous move for the country. Hungary's revisionist aspirations thereby would have had a chance of being attained in the North, but Kánya realized that much more was at stake, because a German-Czechoslovak-Hungarian clash could easily escalate into a wider war. Kánya's and Hitler's intentions and wills clashed in the process. In the end, the Hungarian government refused to take part in such a risky undertaking. It is possible to say that the Hungarian "no" to Hitler had a determining role in bringing about the Munich solution — which kept the peace and averted war in 1938. This basically fortunate turn of events for both Hungary and Europe is attributable, to no small measure, to the diplomatic skill and political caution of Foreign Minister Kálmán Kánya.

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During 1938, Kánya and his colleagues witnessed from Budapest a curious transitional period in European political relations. The international structure created after the First World War was still largely intact. To a fairly high degree, European peace and stability continued to rest on the domination of the continent by France and her allies: Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Romania, more or less augmented since the mid-1930s by the Soviet Union. Britain usually supported this continental constellation.<sup>2</sup>

But the French-British-Little Entente hegemony in Europe was placed under an increasingly bold challenge by a resurgent Germany under the leadership of Hitler. As the most dramatic manifestation of this tendency, during March, 1938, Hitler occupied and annexed neighboring Austria. Western Europe reacted only with mild protests. As far as Hungary was concerned, this successful modification of the status quo was a promising sign, but hardly an unqualified one. In the spring of 1938, a powerful Germany had appeared on the doorsteps of Hungary, the whole

Danube basin, and the Balkans. The western half of Czechoslovakia was surrounded by German territory on three sides. For better or for worse, the natural weight of Germany would become once again a very significant factor in the life of East Central Europe.<sup>3</sup>

In making his strategic territorial gains, Hitler very ably exploited the irrational spirit of nationalism widely influential in the 1930's. By making his demands usually in the name of national self-determination, he sounded a generally accepted moral justification. The incorporation of Germanic Austria into the Third Reich seemed to substantiate his claim. This is how Kánya perceived the situation, as he reported to the foreign affairs committee of the Hungarian parliament after the *Anschluss*: Hitler was interested only in "*Blut und Boden*." But in reality, the Fuehrer envisioned the establishment of German supremacy over the continent, with a possible acquiescence on the part of the British Empire. The next step was intended to be the forceful creation of an Eastern *Lebensraum*, stretching to the Urals and Volga. Various degrees of domination and exploitation were held in store for the peoples of this vast region, including the Hungarians. The "superior" German *Volk* would forge a great territorial empire over the "inferior" masses of the "East." Rivaling in size and importance the United States, Germany would thus become a world power, capable of participating in global politics at least as an equal of either the British Empire or the United States.<sup>4</sup>

Though quite familiar with expansionistic geopolitical theories emanating from the NSDAP, Kánya was hardly in a position to discern fully how seriously these views were held by Hitler. Kánya was traditional European diplomat who considered Hitler as a similarly traditional politician, with whom it would be possible to deal according to generally accepted principles and procedures. Kánya believed, moreover, that Hungary and Germany were tied together by the force of past association, by comradeship-in-arms, and by the similar fates suffered in the First World War and in the subsequent peace settlement. It was only later that Kánya — and the world — would comprehend that Hitler was, in reality, a dangerous adventurer.<sup>5</sup>

Hungary's international position in the interwar era was quite precarious. It is true that Hungary was a member of the tripartite Rome Pact since its founding in 1934, along with Italy and Austria, but the Rome Pact was only a consultative political agreement, accompanied with certain bilateral economic arrangements. It did not contain any military clauses, as the fate of Austria in 1938 clearly indicated. In any case, the Rome-Berlin Axis of 1936 overshadowed

the significance of the Rome agreements for Italy. It is not that Kánya had not made an effort to improve Hungary's international situation by other steps. From 1933 until late 1936, he had diligently worked for the creation of a large multilateral alliance consisting of Hungary, Austria, Italy, Germany, and perhaps even Poland. Actually, he had intended to enlarge and strengthen the Rome Pacts in this fashion. After some encouraging advances, his "grand design" had failed to materialize. Hungary's prospective allies had not seen their interests sufficiently served by such an alliance, which, in essence, would have been a recreated version of the pre-war Triple Alliance. Hitler had been particularly disinterested in a scheme that had run on a collision course with his vision of a German-dominated "new Europe."<sup>6</sup>

Another option for increasing Hungary's security was the possibility of her making up with her neighbors: Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Romania. In principle, the pragmatic Kánya was not averse to this eventuality, but serious territorial disputes stood in the way. Initially, Kánya and most Hungarian politicians had demanded the return of all the lost territories of the fallen Great Hungary. Eventually, the Hungarian ruling oligarchy, as well as the public, probably would have been sufficiently satisfied with the return of the mainly Hungarian (Magyar) inhabited regions alone. But the beneficiaries of the Treaty of Trianon, banded together in the Little Entente alliance, had not been really willing to hand back any significant territory. In response, Kánya had torpedoed, time after time, such efforts toward Danubian international cooperation in the mid-1930's, as the proposed Danubian Pact or the so-called Danubian Confederation. Stubborn Hungarian irredentism and Little Entente intransigence left Danubian Europe in a state of disunity and vulnerability.<sup>7</sup>

Subsequent to this cluster of events, Kánya had formulated and initiated a so-called policy of free hand from late 1936 on. As an able politician, Kánya had placed his policy in a positive light: Hungary would not choose sides in Europe until she became certain which side would become supreme.<sup>8</sup> Astute observers fully realized the practical wisdom of that position, for after all, Hungary's national security and perhaps even her survival were at stake. However, it should not be forgotten that Hungary's unaligned position had not been entirely a matter of free choice. It had been more a product of necessity, in light of the failure of Kánya's planned alliance and in view of the country's irreconcilable differences with the Little Entente. Kánya's policy, nevertheless, offered certain advantages. Kánya could now attempt to turn to either side — to Germany and

Italy or to Britain, France, and the Little Entente. Should Germany's resurgence elevate her to the position of the arbiter of East Central Europe, Hungary would readily attempt to exploit that opportunity in pursuit of her self-interest. The same stood for Britain, should she decide to pay significant attention to Danubian Europe.

The facts of geography and Hungarian irredentist yearnings imposed on Kánya's policy numerous constraints. Far away Britain, even if concerned and willing, had a great deal of difficulty in exerting significant influence in East Central Europe. France's alliances with the Little Entente made a pro-Hungarian French policy unlikely. Similarly, Britain could support Hungarian revisionism only at the risk of alienating the Little Entente. Yet, most likely, only with the active cooperation of the Little Entente could Britain have any significant political power in Danubian Europe, unless extraordinary conditions surfaced.<sup>9</sup> While Britain's and France's options were fairly limited in the region, neighboring Germany's opportunities and advantages, as friend or foe, were significantly more numerous: familiarity with the region, geographic proximity, similarities in political and social development, economic compatibility, not to mention the fact that Germany had consciously remained uncommitted to any one of the small states of the area.<sup>10</sup> It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that even while attempting to implement an independent foreign policy, Kánya's and his colleagues' steps would lead to Berlin and Rome significantly more often than to London and Paris during 1936-1938. Still, in dealing with Berlin and Rome, Kánya jealously guarded Hungarian sovereignty and he demanded that Hungary be treated according to the principle of equality. On the other hand, in dealing with British and French diplomats, Kánya kept the lines of communication open, often speaking with surprising candor. He continued his diplomatic exchanges with the Soviet Union on the "correct" level. In other words, during 1936-1938, Kánya was careful not to burn his bridges toward London, Paris, and Moscow. Hungary, unlike Germany and Italy, continued to remain a member of the League of Nations and, for the time being, she would not join the Anti-Comintern Pact.<sup>11</sup>

A common distaste for the existence of Czechoslovakia, which contained large minorities of Germans and Hungarians, served as a strong incentive for cooperation between Budapest and Berlin. Hitler viewed Czechoslovakia as an artificial creation. Because of the long history of Germanic domination over the Czechs, he considered Bohemia and Moravia as the rightful possessions of the Third Reich. Besides, he desired a short border, in place of the

extensive German-Czechoslovak frontier. During his famous conference of November 5, 1937, he expressed his intention of dealing with Czechoslovakia and Austria soon. The situation became more acute after the so-called May Crisis. During May 20-21 1938, the Czechoslovak army partially mobilized on the German and Hungarian frontiers. Reports of German troop movements, it appears, had been interpreted in Prague as an impending attack. Britain and France, in turn, firmly expressed their support to Czechoslovakia. Whether or not a German attack was intended, none came. In the eyes of the world, the Fuehrer, much to his chagrin, appeared to have backed down. From this time on, he was even more determined to smash the Czechs militarily. On May 30, he signed "*Fall Gruen*", the plan for the liquidation of Czechoslovakia. The participation of Hungary and Poland was expected, particularly if the war remained a local one.<sup>12</sup>

Hungary's approach to Czechoslovakia was somewhat similar to Germany's. Hungary hoped for the return, based on historical grounds, of the former Upper Hungary, that is Slovakia and Ruthenia. Budapest disregarded the fact that the Slovaks, the great majority of the population, wanted to remain in Czechoslovakia. On the other hand, a significant Hungarian minority, living in the southern strip of the region, did wish to return to Hungary. Other factors entered as well. Czechoslovakia was the leader of the Little Entente. She was tied by military alliances to France and to the Soviet Union. Prague was, in Budapest's view, active in disseminating anti-Hungarian propaganda in the West. The mobilization of the Czechoslovak troops on the Hungarian frontier in the May Crisis further aggravated relations between Budapest and Prague.<sup>13</sup>

Hungarian and German designs on Czechoslovakia, consequently, coincided quite naturally. When Prime Minister Kálmán Darányi and Kánya visited Germany during November 22-25, 1937, Hitler frankly explained his intention of destroying Czechoslovakia and suggested that Hungary could then recover Slovakia. The Hungarians were gratified, though Kánya stressed to Hitler that "Hungary had no intentions whatever of achieving her revisionist aims by force of arms and thereby unleashing a European war." But, at the same time, Kánya expressed willingness to make a final settlement with Yugoslavia, in return for that country's neutrality in a German-Hungarian local conflict with Czechoslovakia. Simultaneously, Kánya quite likely also sought Germany's guarantee of Yugoslav neutrality. Hitler and Goering were happy to see an end to Hungarian revisionist effort in all directions and they promised to intercede in Belgrade. Thereby Hungarian and German foreign

policy goals reached a high degree of congruity, though Hitler was rather reluctant to go as far as guaranteeing the Hungarian-Yugoslav frontier.<sup>14</sup>

As the November meetings in part illustrate, Kánya envisioned the recovery of former Upper Hungary in the case of the following eventualities: 1. Czechoslovakia would disintegrate into its components because of internal antagonisms and/or as consequence of Hitler's pressure; 2. Czechoslovakia would be defeated in a local war by the combined armies of Germany, Hungary, and Poland, with the political support of Italy, should international conditions permit a local war; and finally, with the means of peaceful international diplomacy, including the possibility of great power conference. Kánya was willing to employ any of the methods of traditional power politics for achieving results, as long as the consequences would not be self-defeating, as for example a Little Entente attack or a major European war.<sup>15</sup>

Consequently, during the first months of 1938, Kánya made serious efforts for reaching understandings or creating alliances with Czechoslovakia's neighbors and/or enemies — Poland, Italy, and Germany. Kánya and Horthy visited Warsaw during early February, but not much was accomplished because Kánya and Foreign Minister Jozef Beck did not relate well to each other. Eventually, Kánya clarified his position to Beck in a letter on March 2: "We are determined to take part in every anti-Czech action which might appear necessary, therefore it would be desirable to begin discussions about details, including those of a military nature, as soon as possible."<sup>16</sup> These contacts materialized to some degree, for example in regard to intelligence gathering. In April, Kánya indicated that Hungary aspired to the whole of Upper Hungary, a claim Beck eventually accepted. Beck and Kánya agreed in May that they would make the same demands for the Polish and Hungarian minorities that Germany would demand for the Sudetens. In this way, the two sides reached a general understanding about proceeding against Czechoslovakia jointly, but a specific alliance was not agreed upon.<sup>17</sup>

A similar statement can be made about Kánya's efforts toward Italy. Hungarian-Italian diplomatic exchanges were mainly centered around the neutrality of Yugoslavia in case of a Hungarian-Czechoslovak clash. During mid-May, Kánya sought a bilateral agreement with Rome, in place of the defunct Rome Pact, including assurances of Italian support to Hungary in case of Yugoslav attack. But Mussolini and Italian Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano were unwilling to make a formal written commitment.<sup>18</sup> Kánya pressed

on, nevertheless. On July 18, he and Prime Minister Béla Imrédy held discussions with Mussolini and Ciano in Rome. Here the Hungarian Foreign Minister conjured up the ingenious proposal of resuscitating the Rome Pact by substituting Yugoslavia in place of the fallen Austria. The issue was still Yugoslav neutrality, of course. Though Kánya admitted that Yugoslav Prime Minister Milan Stojadinovič appeared to be ready for a conditional neutrality toward Hungary, it was difficult to know how Stojadinovič would actually behave in case of a Danubian war, emphasized Kánya. In order to assure Yugoslavia's "absolute" neutrality, Kánya requested a preferably written Italian-Hungarian agreement in the form of a military guarantee against Yugoslavia. But Mussolini and Ciano were still unwilling to provide a written guarantee, though the Duce most likely made a verbal assurance to that effect. If that represented a degree of assurance for Hungary, Kánya and Imrédy must have been very much cautioned by Mussolini's rather offhand subsequent reference to a possible wider war, involving not only Italy, Hungary, and Yugoslavia, but France as well.<sup>19</sup>

It is in the light of Kánya's alliance making efforts toward Poland and Italy — though more or less fruitless — that the upcoming Hungarian visit to Germany should be viewed. Kánya was an active creator of policy, not simply someone passively reacting to unfolding events around him. It should also be realized that his intended alliances were not designed simply for their possible military applicability, but more so, in Kánya's mind, they were considered as providing a political deterrent, in order to allow Hungary to accomplish her goals toward Czechoslovakia with only a local war, should that be necessary.<sup>20</sup> That Kánya placed a high value on alliances can be shown by one of his own pronouncements. Austria had fallen, he explained to the foreign policy committee of the Hungarian parliament on March 23, 1938, because she had possessed no military alliances. Consequently, she had been "forced to rely exclusively on her own armed strength for the defense of her independence."<sup>21</sup>

Naturally, Hungary's options toward Czechoslovakia would be determined not only by German, Italian, Yugoslav, and Polish attitudes, but also by the stance of France and Britain. But during the months prior to the Hungarian visit to Germany, signals emanating from London and Paris were mixed. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and his French counterpart, Edouard Daladier, often seemed eager to appease Hitler by limited concessions, only to follow with strong pronouncements about their willingness to resist aggression militarily if necessary. The *Anschluss*



was greeted by the West with only token expressions of displeasure. On the other hand, Paris and London responded to the May Crisis with strong representations to Berlin. Yet the negotiating mission of Lord Runciman, commencing with the end of July, seemed to point, once again, in the direction of a negotiated settlement in the Czechoslovak crisis. Kánya, observing what appeared to be rather constant Western vacillation, could not rule out the possibility of either a peaceful or a military response by the West to Hitler. Nor could, indeed, anyone else, including, most likely, the two Western prime ministers themselves.<sup>22</sup>

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These tendencies acquired concrete form during the Hungarian state visit to Germany. The delegation — consisting of Horthy, Imrédy, their wives, Kánya, Minister of Defense Jenő Rátz and a sizable number diplomatic and military officials — left Budapest by a special train in the late hours of August 20, 1938. From the beginning, it was evident that the German government was placing very high importance on the visit. A triumphal arch greeted the delegation at the new German-Hungarian frontier, an elaborate welcoming was staged at the *Westbahnhof* in Vienna, and the railway route was decorated with a profusion of flags all the way across Germany to Kiel.<sup>23</sup>

As it arrived at Kiel in the morning of August 22, the Hungarian party was greeted by Hitler, Ribbentrop, Goering, Admiral Raeder, and other German officials. The exceptional display of ostentation continued here and throughout the journey. The professed rationale for the visit, the launching of the cruiser *Prinz Eugen*, followed shortly at the Krupp shipyards during the same morning. In arranging the visit, the hosts obviously had not been unmindful of Regent Horthy's well known former career as an admiral of the Austro-Hungarian navy. Mme Horthy christened the ship successfully and, together with other ladies and guests, she later boarded the oceanliner *Patria*. Horthy and Hitler proceeded to the yacht *Grille*, from her deck they watched an impressive naval parade in the harbor, and then cruised out onto the Baltic, in order to view extensive naval maneuvers held on the open sea.<sup>24</sup>

Hitler wasted no time in coming to his real objective concerning the Hungarian state visit. In the late afternoon of August 22, during the return trip to Kiel on the *Grille*, he drew Horthy into a face-to-face discussion. The Fuehrer fairly bluntly exposed to the Regent the essence of the military plan "*Fall Gruen*," expressing his

determination to attack and to destroy Czechoslovakia, with the intention of absorbing her western half into Germany. Hitler requested Horthy that Hungary attack Slovakia from the south as Germany marched against Bohemia and Moravia. The territory Hungary conquered, she could keep, suggested the Fuehrer. According to Horthy's own account, "I replied with all the courtesy but with great firmness that there could be no possibility of Hungarian participation," because of the peaceful nature of Hungarian revisionist intentions and due to Hungary's military unpreparedness. From the German record, the bulk of which had been most likely orally transmitted by Hitler to State Secretary Ernst Weizsäcker, a seemingly contradictory picture emerges. First, Weizsäcker places the Hitler-Horthy meeting for the morning of August 23, simultaneously with the Ribbentrop-Imrédy-Kánya discussions, and not for the afternoon of August 22, as stated in Horthy's memoirs. Perhaps there were two meetings between Horthy and Hitler at the opening of the visit or perhaps one or both sources are somewhat inaccurate in this regard. Second, the Weizsäcker memorandum states that "Horthy had expressed himself to the Fuehrer in more definite language. While not keeping silent on his misgivings as to the British attitude, he nevertheless made it clear that Hungary intended to cooperate." The contradictory nature of these statements is probably more apparent than real. Actually, the two statements should be perceived as mostly complementary, if we understand that, after the fact, both Horthy and Hitler must have wished to place a different emphasis on what had transpired, for the sake of appearances. Consequently, Horthy most likely did express Hungary's general intention of moving against Czechoslovakia, as the German records indicate, but not in the fall, because of her military unpreparedness and her fear of a general European war, involving Britain, France, and perhaps the Soviet Union, the Regent stated. At this stage of the discussion, Hitler lost his temper and the meeting came to an abrupt end.<sup>25</sup>

Historical literature occasionally labels Hitler's offer to Horthy as an "alliance." This interpretation is not entirely accurate, for a variety of reasons. What Hitler offered was a coordinated German and Hungarian military attack on a third country, and in the course of the discussion, he did promise arms shipments to Hungary. But that was all. There is no indication that Hitler desired to put anything in writing. He mentioned nothing about dispatching troops for Hungary's assistance against Czechoslovakia, should the need arise. By not raising the topic, he underlined his unwillingness

to promise a military guarantee against another possible antagonist, namely Yugoslavia. Consequently, Kánya's subsequent reference, phrased as a "military convention," is perhaps the most appropriate in describing what Hitler had in mind.<sup>26</sup>

Hitler's eagerness for luring Hungary into cooperation is explicable on both political and military grounds. A combined German, Hungarian, and Polish attack would lift the burden of sole responsibility from the shoulders of the Fuehrer. A united assault by three of her neighbors would illustrate to the world the "artificial" nature of Czechoslovakia. The march of three armies, moreover, would provide the likelihood of a rapid victory, on which Hitler heavily counted for the prevention of possible Western intervention. The southern (Austrian) theater of German operations was seriously handicapped by transportation problems: there was only one railroad line in existence for deploying troops against the southern, and unfortified, frontier of Bohemia and Moravia. It is not surprising, therefore, that Hitler intended an important role for the Hungarian politicians and soldiers.<sup>27</sup>

Horthy was not entirely surprised by Hitler's request. For many years, Budapest had shared with Berlin the hope of moving against Czechoslovakia some day. The Hungarian-German discussions of November, 1937, had strongly reinforced these expectations. The fate of Austria had been another indication of possible future developments. In fact, on the day of their departure and even during the journey by train, the Hungarian politicians had received warning messages from a few of Germany's uneasy military leaders about Hitler's exact intentions: Czechoslovakia would be attacked in late September or early October, even at the risk of a major European war.<sup>28</sup>

With its guard up, the Hungarian delegation, before arriving to Kiel, had formulated a general response, almost certainly under the guidance of Kánya, to a likely request or demand by Hitler. The position stated that "Hungary, for the benefit of her own goals, is also determined to move against Czechoslovakia, however, the timing can not be determined; the fall of this year is not very suitable, because our preparations are not sufficiently advanced."<sup>29</sup> It is most probably this line of argument that Horthy conveyed to Hitler aboard the *Grille* on August 22.

Despite its brevity, the Hungarian statement of position is factually quite valid. Hungary was indeed unprepared militarily, particularly against a well-armed Czechoslovak army deployed behind strong permanent fortifications along the Danube frontier.<sup>30</sup>

But the crux of the matter lay beyond military considerations. As Kánya understood and stressed to his colleagues, Hungary was very much unprepared diplomatically. Yugoslavia's neutrality in case of a German-Czechoslovak-Hungarian clash was still uncertain. The same was the case for Romania. To date, Germany had been unwilling to guarantee Yugoslav neutrality. Mussolini, as well, would not make the same commitment for Hungary's benefit, in any other but rather offhand oral form. Poland had not desired to tie herself to a Hungarian alliance either. It is not surprising therefore, that the unfavorable international situation was the uppermost factor for the leading figures of the Hungarian delegation, we must add, down to the last man. During the discussions in Germany, however, Hungary's military unpreparedness served as a convenient excuse for fending off Hitler's requests.

Throughout the visit to Germany, the issue of Yugoslav neutrality, consequently, hung over Kánya's head as a Damoclean sword. The Hungarian Foreign Minister comprehended with a great deal of trepidation that a local Hungarian-Czechoslovak conflict, in cooperation with Germany, could very well result in an East Central European war, should Yugoslavia decide to march. He understood that in Belgrade, especially on the political "left" and in the military, a strong pro-Czechoslovak sentiment continued to exist, with the possible effect of firming up the Little Entente alliance. If Yugoslavia would march, Romania would likely follow. But a Yugoslav military action would quite likely force Mussolini's hand. With Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Romania, and Italy all in the conflict, how long could France refrain from honoring her alliances and for how many days could Britain remain on the sidelines? How would the Soviet Union react?<sup>31</sup>

The Hungarian Foreign Minister knew fully well that the interlocking sympathies, commitments, and alliances could, with ease, escalate a local German-Czechoslovak-Hungarian conflict, via Yugoslavia, into an East Central European war, which could rapidly drag Italy, France, Britain, and other states into a major European or world war. Much to his credit, Kánya discerned the existence of these dangerous linkages underneath the uneasy surface of European international life and he was very cautious not to make the wrong move and thereby trigger the outbreak of a major conflict. This is not surprising, particularly from a former Austro-Hungarian diplomat, who had witnessed from far away Mexico a similar interlocking chain of events plunge Europe into a world war during the summer of 1914. The resultant First World War, after all, had

culminated in the defeat and disintegration of Austria-Hungary and it had led to a drastic truncation of Hungary in the Treaty of Trianon. In 1938, Kánya feared, the effect of irresponsible adventurism would be even worse — a Hungarian national suicide.<sup>32</sup>

Given the possible unfavorable consequences, many European politicians would have recoiled from any action under ordinary circumstances. But the circumstances were hardly ordinary for Hungary. Having lost in the Treaty of Trianon two-thirds of her territory and three fifths of her population (including three million Hungarians), Hungary was permeated, no less in 1938 than before, with a strong irredentist spirit for the recovery of as much lost territory as possible. Kánya was not an exception in this sense. He was a spirited nationalist and a determined revisionist, though his policies were very much guided and moderated by his sense of political realism. He was willing to act “if the chances of success were only sixty or seventy percent,” according to his own admission in reference to regaining territory from Czechoslovakia.<sup>33</sup> For Kánya, the primary condition for that eventuality, however, was that a German-Hungarian move against Czechoslovakia would remain a local one. In Kánya’s mind, it was Yugoslavia’s action or inaction that would keep such a conflict localized or not, as we have seen. The most certain way to assure that condition was to wrest from Berlin a guarantee, given to Hungary, of Belgrade’s neutrality. Naturally, the Western spirit of appeasement would have to continue unabated, otherwise a localization of the conflict would also be impossible. It is with these general concerns and specific objectives in mind that we should consider another concurrent manifestation of Kánya’s foreign policy — the discussions between Hungary and the Little Entente.

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The negotiations with the Little Entente, in view of their far-reaching and manifold ramifications, shed a great deal of light on the extreme complexity of Kánya’s foreign policy and they clearly underline the aging, white-haired Hungarian Foreign Minister’s diplomatic brilliance. Kánya had sent out feelers in late 1936 for the possibility of commencing discussions. It had not been an accident that Hungary’s first steps toward her neighbors had been taken shortly after Kánya’s realization that his multilateral grand design would not materialize. Ostensibly, Kánya’s goal was the normalization of relations with Yugoslavia, Romania, and Czechoslovakia. As

the negotiations had begun in early 1937, Hungary had sought the Little Entente's recognition of her military equality, that is, her right to rearm openly. In response, Hungary would promise a pledge of non-aggression toward her neighbors, based on the Kellogg-Briand Pact, which these states would reciprocally affirm. Before too long, Kánya had also insisted on bilateral minorities agreements between Hungary and each of the states in question, professed to be necessary for the protection of the Hungarian minorities detached from the homeland by the Treaty of Trianon. This last effort had been undoubtedly sincere, but it also served the ulterior purpose of becoming an instrument for breaking up the Little Entente, as we shall see.<sup>34</sup>

As the negotiations had begun — through normal diplomatic channels, at Geneva, and at Sinaia in Romania — at first Czechoslovakia proved to be quite eager for a settlement, in the hope of making a headway toward the formation of a bloc against German expansionism. Yugoslavia, on the other hand, attempted to edge toward Berlin, in a fence-straddling effort between the two sides, and consequently seemed willing in the spring of 1937 to come to a separate agreement with Hungary. But her two partners had vetoed the move in the council of the Little Entente. Conversely, during 1937, Romania had been the most reluctant to come to terms with Hungary, because of the sensitive Hungarian minority issue in Transylvania. Britain and France favored a settlement of antagonisms in Danubian Europe, for much the same reason as Prague. Berlin and Rome were somewhat puzzled by the entire proceedings. Budapest provided different versions of the negotiations to the Axis capitals and to the West. After delays and interruptions, the meetings continued, and in May, 1938, Kánya had succeeded, with Stojadinović's cooperation, on a key point. Yugoslavia and Romania would negotiate with Hungary on the minority issue without Czechoslovakia's participation. But no immediate agreement had resulted, because Bucharest had balked at the last moment. Czechoslovak Foreign Minister Emil Krofta was beginning to see the handwriting on the wall, as he had reproached the Hungarians in May: Budapest desires no settlement with Prague, but wants to split the Little Entente and awaits the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. Now Prague had become the main opponent of reconciliation, while the new Romanian government had proved to be more agreeable. In May, Bucharest had issued a Minorities Statute. The statute was not particularly far-reaching, but Kánya had jumped at the opportunity in early August and had signaled the Romanians

that the time had arrived for the conclusion of the Hungarian-Little Entente negotiations. On August 19, the day before the Hungarian delegation's departure to Germany, the two sides were still holding discussions.<sup>35</sup>

The timing of the subsequent Hungarian agreement with the Little Entente had been more of a design on Kánya's part than an accident. Hitler's decision for the dates of the Hungarian state visit had been made in April and the Little Entente had set the next meeting of its council for Bled, Yugoslavia, as its May meeting, when the dates of the Hungarian delegation's journey to Germany had not yet been made public. But Kánya had been cognizant of the timing for both of the planned events and he had decided to profit from the opportunity provided by their fortunate congruence. It had not been an accident that Kánya had expressed his readiness for an agreement with Romania on August 9, just two days before the Hungarian press had announced, on August 11, the dates of the impending state visit to Germany. In fact, it was the Hungarian Foreign Minister who had drafted and had proposed the communique that the two sides accepted, after minor modifications, and published in the evening of August 23, 1938, simultaneously at Bled and Budapest, though in different formats.<sup>36</sup>

The communique represented the published component of the so-called Bled agreements. In it, the Little Entente accepted Hungary's military equality and all four states renounced the use of force as an instrument of national policy in their mutual relations, in the spirit of the Kellogg-Briand Pact.<sup>37</sup> Simultaneously, a confidential agreement was concluded on the Hungarian minority issue between Hungary, on the one side, and Yugoslavia and Romania on the other. During the morning of August 23, both components of the Bled agreements were signed by György Bakács-Bessenyey, the Hungarian representative in Belgrade, and by Prime Minister Stojadinovič of Yugoslavia.<sup>38</sup> Before departing for Germany, Kánya had raised his demands for the Hungarian minority in Czechoslovakia to the level of "sovereign self-administration," designed to be unacceptably high for the Prague government. An agreement between Czechoslovakia and Hungary on the nationality issue, therefore, was not possible, but was to be handled through future bilateral discussions.<sup>39</sup> Kánya, by stressing the importance of the minority agreements, was consequently able to have the entire Bled agreements considered by all participants — including Prague — as only a temporary agreement, which would become final, as an agreement complex, once a Hungarian-Czechoslovak minorities

accord would also be reached.<sup>40</sup> It should be stressed that Kánya was in control of the Hungarian side of the proceedings at Bled, with the help of telephone and telegraph communications from Kiel. The final permission for the signing of the documents had to come from the officials of the foreign ministry at Budapest, because Kánya was at sea at the time — but Kánya gave his retroactive assent, as well as the approval for the publication of the final communique.<sup>41</sup> It should be mentioned that Czechoslovakia was willing to acquiesce in an unequal treatment by Hungary only under the pressure of London and Paris. Yugoslavia and Romania, on the other hand, were playing a double game, during and after the Bled meeting. In fact, subsequently to their signing, each of the governments interpreted the agreements somewhat differently, depending on the time and place, to suit that particular country's immediate political interests.<sup>42</sup>

Another rather important facet of the Bled agreements was the divergence of prevalent perceptions about their nature and importance. In the Little Entente capitals and in Western Europe, particularly in the popular press, the Bled accords were considered as permanent and therefore a significant victory for anti-German cooperation in Danubian Europe — just at the time when the Hungarian delegation was feared to be concluding an offensive alliance with the Third Reich. In this regard, an important fact is that Kánya wished to utilize the perception of permanency for increasing the importance of Hungary in the eyes of the German leaders. On the other hand, when the situation in Germany did not develop as expected, Kánya would be forced to emphasize the Bled agreements' "temporary" nature.<sup>43</sup> The value of Kánya's delicate diplomatic construction was not only that the agreements could be perceived in two contrasting fashions, but that they could be made final in either direction as well, as the train of events would necessitate. Should German expansionistic pressure require it, Hungary would be in a position to conclude a permanent agreement with Czechoslovakia and the entire Little Entente. Or, on the contrary, she could refuse to come to a permanent agreement with the same, thereby allowing the whole agreement complex to lapse, as it would in actuality happen. In this sense, the Bled agreements represented the brilliant climax of Kánya's policy of free hand.

The delineation of Kánya's motives may reduce our perplexity over the seemingly complicated and contradictory developments at Kiel and Bled. First and foremost, Kánya strove to enhance Hungary's importance to Germany. Hitler had rejected the Hun-



garian grand design, much to Kánya's chagrin. The Hungarian Foreign Minister would now play his trump card — as he had threatened then German Foreign Minister Konstantin Neurath in late 1934 — of making up with the Little Entente or at least appearing to do so.<sup>44</sup> This was done hardly out of spite, but rather as a result of cool calculation. Most likely, Kánya still hoped during August of 1938 to wrest from Hitler his guarantee of Yugoslav neutrality, considered indispensable for the safety of Hungary's rear in case of her participation against Czechoslovakia. Secondly, Kánya was indeed attempting to break up the Little Entente. If successful, Hungary would gain a welcome relief from coordinated pressure and intimidation by Prague, Belgrade, and Bucharest. But more importantly, by isolating Czechoslovakia from her allies, Hungary would make an advance diplomatic preparation for the eventuality of a local conflict for the recovery of Slovakia and Ruthenia. Third, with the Bled agreements in hand, the Hungarian delegation in Germany would be able to minimize the chances, though fairly remote, of being meted out the same type of intimidating treatment that had been accorded to Austrian Chancellor Kurt von Schuschnigg by Hitler and his generals at Obersalzberg on February 12, 1938.<sup>45</sup> Hungary would not be pressured into a premature war against Czechoslovakia, particularly if the situation could degenerate into an East Central European, European, or world war. If pressure were applied, Hungary could attempt to retreat into the company of her newly-found Little Entente friends, honor her pledge of non-aggression to Czechoslovakia and hope at the same time for Western support.

All told, in pursuit of her irredentist goals, Hungary still continued to count heavily on Germany's and Italy's international support, as Kánya had revealed to European diplomats over the years and as he had repeated to the members of the foreign policy committee of the Hungarian parliament time after time.<sup>46</sup> Hungary was unable to escape the deterministic conditions of her history and of her geography and she could not overcome the lack of serious interest in her problems on the part of other major European states. Kánya's entire foreign policy approach during 1937-1938 did indeed represent a "policy of free hand," because Hungary did not unreservedly commit herself to any one state or configuration of states. But, in reality, it was a policy of free hand only to the extent that Hungary's escape routes were left fairly open. Perhaps Kánya's line should be labeled as a "policy of safe escape." Yet, at the same time, because Kánya did not base the course of foreign affairs on

sentiment, he would have been entirely willing to change sides, if Britain and France, despite the odds, would have made their power effectively felt in distant East Central Europe.

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In the meanwhile, the Hungarian-German discussions continued in Kiel, but in an increasingly somber atmosphere, as the news of Bled rapidly spread. Kánya and Imrédy met with German Foreign Minister Joachim Ribbentrop aboard the *Patria* during the morning of August 23, as the entire entourage sailed to the island of Heligoland, for inspecting its fortifications and its military bases.<sup>47</sup> Understandably, Ribbentrop was highly perplexed about Bled. But Kánya was in a self-confident and even arrogant mood. He had created conditions at Bled that he would now attempt to exploit for Hungary's benefit. The negotiations with the Little Entente were "historical" and had brought nothing new, Kánya claimed. The Bled communiqué actually to be issued in the afternoon had not been really justified by the negotiations, he continued; in any case, the approval for the communiqué had been given by his subordinates; and finally, the whole matter was not really timely any more. But Ribbentrop could not be that easily put off. The Bled communiqué will not lead to Yugoslav neutrality; Hungary is blocking the way of her intervention in Czechoslovakia; morally it will be more difficult for the Yugoslavs to abandon their Czech allies; it will be so perceived that Hungary is moving away from the German-Czech conflict; and she is consequently renouncing revisionism — so ran the counter argument of the German Foreign Minister.

Kánya's rejoinder, unfortunately, is only touched upon in the German minutes and there is no extant official Hungarian record of the meeting. It was at this stage that Kánya, most likely, attempted to use his Bled leverage to the advantage of attempting to secure, once again, a German guarantee of Yugoslav neutrality. The German minutes reflect the situation to some degree. In response to Ribbentrop's query as to what the Hungarians would do if the Fuehrer would implement his decision of responding to new "Czech provocations" with the use of force, Kánya's main concern surfaced: "Yugoslavia must remain neutral if Hungary were to march northward" against Czechoslovakia. Moreover, Hungarian rearmament had just begun and would require one or more additional years to complete. But Ribbentrop was not willing to reply any

more affirmatively than “the Yugoslavs would take care not to walk into the pincers of the Axis powers.” The German Foreign Minister made similar assurances for Romania, France, and England. Quite likely, it was somewhere at this stage of the discussions that Kánya, seeing his hopes dashed anew, lost control of his tongue, and made a few sarcastic remarks at the expense of his German counterpart, which the latter would never forgive. In other words, “the direct danger of Hungary’s unprotected flanks” continued to be a serious and unresolved concern for Kánya and Imrédy. If Yugoslav (and consequently Romanian) neutrality could not be assured, then Hungary would not march: this was the most crucial conclusion of the meeting. In all, the diplomatic skill of a small and unarmed country’s foreign minister could not overcome a German policy of self-interest.<sup>48</sup>

While Yugoslav neutrality seemed to be principally Kánya’s preoccupation, Prime Minister Imrédy voiced his firm conviction that in the case of a German-Czech conflict, France would certainly intervene. The Hungarian position by the end of the meeting was summarized by Weizsacker as: “The Hungarian reply still remained subject to conditions,” and “No definite political basis for this — the exact moment for Hungarian intervention — was agreed.” These lines indicate that the Hungarians, at this stage, were still largely repeating their original position formulated before arriving at Kiel.<sup>49</sup>

The politicians from Budapest could at least take solace in not having been subjected to pressure or having been given an ultimatum by Hitler and Ribbentrop. When, in the afternoon of the same day, Imrédy met briefly with Hitler, the Hungarian Prime Minister “was most relieved when the Fuehrer stated to him that, in this particular case, he required nothing of Hungary.” But, the Fuehrer continued, “he who wanted to sit at the table, must at least help in the kitchen.” Apparently, Hitler had overestimated the Hungarian willingness to march.<sup>50</sup>

One additional meeting might have taken place between the two sides on August 23, perhaps in the evening, because Weizsacker’s memorandum concludes with the statement that “Hungary is convinced that she will not be able to intervene until some 14 days after the outbreak of the war.”<sup>51</sup> This is a surprisingly novel position, which to some degree represents a Hungarian willingness to assume additional risks, even with an unprepared army, for the sake of making a significant irredentis territorial gain. Given its technical nature, there can be little doubt that Foreign Minister Kánya played

a determinant role in creating the position. But, after careful consideration, it becomes plain that the new Hungarian formula was still a cautious one, if we keep in mind the mitigating impact of a number of significant political-military linkages present in the European and East Central European strategic situation. Two Weeks after the outbreak of a German-Czechoslovak war, the belligerency or non-belligerency of France and Britain would have been a settled matter, thus the possible outbreak of a major European war would have been a foregone conclusion and Hungary would have been in a position to act accordingly. Equally importantly, as long as Hungary stayed out of a German-Czechoslovak war, Yugoslavia and Romania would have had no justification for marching against her, particularly in view of the Bled agreements. On the other hand, if France and Britain would not have fought against Hitler, and after fourteen days Hungary would have joined a victorious Germany in the occupation of a defeated Czechoslovakia, it would have been very unlikely that Belgrade and Bucharest, under the circumstances, would have attacked Hungary. In both instances, she could reasonably expect not to be considered the instigator of an East Central European war. This line of thinking, inferred from the various Hungarian positions on the subject, unmistakably carries the intellectual stamp of Kánya. The latest Hungarian position was somewhat more risky than the original stand, but because the functioning or non-functioning of pertinent international linkages had been taken into consideration, it was not radically more so. In this fashion, it is a fitting testimony to Foreign Minister Kánya's political flexibility.

On the morning of August 24, the *Patria* sailed with the entire party from Heligoland to Hamburg. From there Horthy and Hitler and their respective entourages traveled by separate trains to Berlin. On the way to the Presidential Palace on the Wilhelmstrasse, Horthy and Hitler greeted an enthusiastic crowd from an open car they rode. The day ended with an official state banquet, during which the usual complimentary toasts were made. The next morning, a major military parade was held in the capital in honor of the guests, who, along with the military attaches of many countries, seemed properly impressed with Hitler's latest military hardware. The evening was capped with a gala opera performance of *Lohengrin*.<sup>52</sup>

During the 24th, the impact of the Bled communique, published the evening before, was now fully felt. The popular press in Western Europe, in the capitals of the Little Entente, and even in Budapest, interpreted it as a major anti-German victory. On top of it, the Czechoslovak and Romanian ministers to Berlin, along with other

“friendly” diplomats, appeared at the Berlin railway station to greet, above all, Horthy’s train. Hitler was so incensed that he gave a good dressing down to his master of ceremonies and he toyed with the idea of canceling the opera performance.<sup>53</sup>

Kánya soon realized that the Bled communique had overreached its purpose. Its negative impact, combined with the Hungarian refusals to march, created an uncomfortably tense atmosphere in Berlin. Understandably, from this time on, keeping alive the damaged Hungarian-German connection became his and the delegation’s central preoccupation. In this spirit, Imrédy and Kánya gave a press conference during the morning of August 25. The Prime Minister spoke in enthusiastic terms about his impressions in Germany and stressed that the Bled accords represented only an “intention.” Kánya categorically stated that the agreements would not be in effect until a full agreement had been reached with Czechoslovakia on the minority issue.<sup>54</sup>

Because Hitler would not see him, Kánya requested, for the same day, an interview with Ribbentrop.<sup>55</sup> Ribbentrop’s opening comments indicated how low German-Hungarian relations had sunk, as Kánya feared. The Czech and Western press were jubilant over the Bled communique, the German Foreign Minister remarked, which was interpreted abroad “as a rift in the German-Hungarian friendship and as a renunciation by Hungary of her revisionist aims.” Comprehending how high the stakes had become, Kánya decided to be entirely frank about Bled, repeating his arguments about the preliminary nature of the agreements, the tactic of upping demands to Prague, and the likelihood that neither Budapest or Prague would actually honor what they had signed. Ribbentrop became only partially appeased as he agreed with Kánya that the true meaning of Bled would depend on how the (inspired) Hungarian press would treat it in the days ahead. Next, Kánya came forward with a completely new stance: because Hungary’s military strength had in fact improved, by October 1 she could participate in an attack against Czechoslovakia. It is difficult to know if this was a new Hungarian view or Kánya’s own personal stance. In any case, it represented a major concession to Germany, because the new position disregarded the requirement of even relative certainty about Yugoslav neutrality, committing Hungary to attack simultaneously with the Third Reich. The interpretation of Kánya’s motives is also difficult. It could have constituted a sincere but desperate act on Kánya’s part for maintaining Hungarian-German friendship or could have been only a momentary tactic for appeasing a perturbed Ribbentrop — as Horthy would later explain in his memoirs.

Because no member of the Hungarian delegation — including Kánya — would repeat the position again, it must have been the latter, though an uncharacteristically unsafe one. The Reich Foreign Minister, unconvinced, did not even respond.<sup>56</sup>

Another face-to-face meeting between Hitler and Horthy in the afternoon of August 25 only aggravated the tensions. In the meantime, Horthy and General Walther Brauchitsch, the commander-in-chief of the German army, had shared their misgivings about a possible war on Czechoslovakia. Having learned that this had happened, Hitler opened with recriminations to Horthy, which the latter did not accept kindly. Nothing was agreed upon once again. The Regent attempted to appease the Fuehrer, perhaps after this meeting sometime, by offering to intercede in Warsaw on Berlin's behalf concerning the Corridor issue. But the former advised against any such steps.<sup>57</sup>

What Hitler could not accomplish with the politicians and diplomats, he next tried with the Hungarian military. Probably in the morning, before the delegation left Berlin on August 26, Hitler met with General Rátz. The Fuehrer gave Rátz the full treatment: He was determined to settle accounts with the Czechs; Germany was superior militarily to the West; and Britain and France would not intervene. The novel element in Hitler's line of argument was the raising of a supposed Polish threat. Poland would probably intervene, claimed the Fuehrer, in which case Slovakia would fall into her hands and Hungary would be left with nothing. Consequently, this was the last chance for a Hungarian revisionist success in that region. But Rátz would not succumb to Hitler's blandishments. The Hungarian military was in the first stage of reorganization, he replied, thus the fall would be particularly unsuitable for a campaign. In any case, Belgrade's neutrality was uncertain, Rátz continued. Should Yugoslavia fight and should Mussolini honor his verbal promise by coming to the aid of Hungary, the conflict would cease to be a local war, because "there would be growing repercussions," argued the Hungarian Minister of Defense. Hitler disagreed and there was no meeting of the minds between the two sides once again. Still, Hitler brought up the need of the *Luftwaffe* for direction-inding stations and emergency landing space in Hungary. Rátz gave his assent and so would his political superiors. The meeting closed with Hitler's assurance of his readiness to authorize German-Hungarian military staff discussions. Until the very end of the Hungarian state visit, Hitler continued to assign a crucial role to Hungary in his plans against Czechoslovakia.<sup>58</sup>

On August 26, the Hungarians traveled to Potsdam. Imrédy and Kánya held a short meeting with Ribbentrop in the Charlottenburg Palace. Kánya continued his retreat on the Bled accords by claiming, inaccurately, that Hungary had not signed any agreements with Czechoslovakia because of the minority issue, but only with Yugoslavia and Romania. In other words, Kánya had given up on attempting to explain the diplomatic complexity of the Bled agreements, instead, he resorted to dissimulation in order to assuage his German counterpart. In his defense, it should be stressed that the multiplicity of reasons for which the Bled agreements had been necessary before the visit to Germany, were no longer timely at the visit's end. Imrédy, in his turn, stressed once again to a largely silent Ribbentrop his opinion that France would go to the aid of Czechoslovakia in the case of a German attack. The discussions were obviously deteriorating to a totally non-productive level.<sup>59</sup>

In the afternoon, Horthy went to Karinhall, Hermann Goering's hunting lodge in the Schorfheide forest. Because the weather was poor, not much hunting was done, thus there was time for discussion. Horthy brought up the possibility of postponing the war with Czechoslovakia until the spring, to which the pliable Goering responded in a fairly positive sense, which the Hungarians accepted with delight at first, until they realized the emptiness of the Reich Marshall's words. Goering also showed understanding for the Hungarian need of being assured about Yugoslav non-belligerency. Though he was certain of Stojadinović's neutrality, Goering promised to get in touch with Belgrade on the issue and to report back to the Hungarians. If that promise sounded encouraging, another topic brought up by Goering must have been like cold water on the guests. The Reich Marshall inquired whether Hungary would be in a position to supply gasoline to Germany "in case a possible conflict lasted for any length of time." Imrédy politely declined, but the implication of Goering's words must have been unmistakable — a major war was not being ruled out by one of the chief figures of the Third Reich. On the evening of August 26, the delegation departed by train to Nuremberg for a short sightseeing visit there on the next day and then continued back toward home.<sup>60</sup>

The German Minister to Hungary, Otto Erdmannsdorff, traveling with the delegation back to Budapest, was a witness to the final Hungarian reaction to the visit. Horthy was almost apologetic: he had for years desired the rapid success of Hungarian revisionism, but was now forced by the international situation "to sound a warning note." Yet Imrédy would not repeat his forebodings —

which he had given four times in Germany — about the likelihood of French intervention. Perhaps he was beginning to have doubts about the validity and wisdom of his position. But Kánya was certain and satisfied: “The Hungarians would fight even if the chances of success were only 60-70 percent. But they could not be expected to commit suicide.” Stojadinovič would not provide a definite reply; whether or not Yugoslavia would fight would be determined by the attitude of France and Britain; should Mussolini respond to a Yugoslav attack on Hungary, the main strength of the Italian forces would be tied down on the French frontier and the remainder would quickly become held up in the impassable Karst mountains on the Yugoslav border — so reasoned Kánya and the group. That is, Hungary would be thrust into the flames of an East Central European and a much wider war. As Kánya confided to a fellow Hungarian diplomat about Hitler a few days after the state visit: “That madman wants to unleash the war whatever the cost.”<sup>61</sup> But in 1938, Hungary wanted no part in the tragedy of another major war.

Yet, during the first weeks of September, a peaceful solution to the German-Czechoslovak antagonism was becoming more and more a possibility. As Neville Chamberlain gained the initiative in the direction of securing a diplomatic solution, Budapest was becoming increasingly hopeful that the same approach would be applied to the Hungarian minority issue in Czechoslovakia. In fact, Chamberlain sent a promise to Budapest on September 19, through an intermediary, stating that “I wholeheartedly sympathize with Hungary, which has no reason for anxiety. I am carefully keeping Hungary’s situation in mind.” He urged a continuation of Hungary’s “peaceful and calm attitude.”<sup>62</sup>

Hitler, on the other hand, began to fear that a peaceful cession of Sudeten German territory would rob him of the opportunity of conquering all of Bohemia and Moravia. Consequently, the Fuehrer reverted to his original intention of a coordinated outside military attack on Czechoslovakia. With this in mind, Hitler invited Imrédy and Kánya back to Germany. On September 20, the two Hungarians flew on Hitler’s airplane to Berchtesgaden. There they were treated by the Chancellor to a variation on a familiar theme: He was determined to destroy Czechoslovakia within three weeks, even if it meant world war, but France and Britain would not fight; he would be brutal in presenting the German demands to Chamberlain at Godesberg; the best solution was a military one, but there was a danger that the Czechs would accept every demand; this was the last chance for Hungary to take part — most likely simultaneously with Germany, we would have to infer. Imrédy presented the Hungarian



stance, while Kánya held his tongue. The Prime Minister expressed surprise at the tempo of events; Budapest expected a conflict within a year or two; Hungary would make additional military preparations, but these could not be expected to be completed in fourteen days, in any case, the pro-French Yugoslav military had to be taken seriously. In all, Imrédy, with a fine sense of oblique diplomatic language, said “no” to Hitler once again, and even seemed to have backed down on the promise of August 23 for possible action fourteen days after a German move. With his silence, Kánya seconded all of this.<sup>63</sup>

For Hitler, the Hungarian refusal of August and September of 1938 represented a critical setback. For psychological, political, and military reasons, a Hungarian military attack was a key component of his expectations for defeating Czechoslovakia militarily and thereby wiping her off the map. But as a result of the refusal, he was forced to revise his intentions downward. The Fuehrer, in fact, was rapidly becoming a prisoner of his own expansionistic design. Following his secret directives, the German National Socialists in the so-called Sudetenland caused serious clashes with the Czechoslovak authorities during 1938. With demagogic mastery, Hitler whipped the populace of Germany into a state of high emotionalism about the condition of their kin beyond the frontier, for example, by his Nuremberg speech of September 12, in which he now openly claimed the right of national self-determination for the Sudetens. Having created the crisis, during which his demands became far reaching, the Fuehrer could ill afford, politically speaking, to back down again, especially in view of the May Crisis. His generals, however, were apprehensive as usual, his ally Mussolini advised caution, and the British Prime Minister worked with determination for a peaceful solution. In fact, after Chamberlain’s meeting with Hitler at Berchtesgaden on September 15, London and Paris began to advise Prague for conceding to the Fuehrer’s demand for the Sudetenland. In other words, Britain and France were now willing to grant what Hitler’s propaganda demanded, the “liberation” of the Sudetens from the control of Prague. But, as we have seen, in reality the Fuehrer desired not an ethnic or “partial,” but a territorial or “total” solution, by destroying Czechoslovakia entirely. However, the remaining credible justification for the latter eventuality was a Hungarian military participation against Czechoslovakia, which Budapest continued to decline. Having been backed into a corner by circumstances, Hitler glumly resigned himself to the road of negotiation, which culminated in the Munich Conference of September 29-30, 1938. Its end product was an ethnic solution and

decidedly a peaceful one — at Czechoslovakia's expense. Under Neville Chamberlain's leadership, this diplomatic conference turned over to Hitler only the mainly German inhabited border regions of Bohemia and Moravia.<sup>64</sup> All said and done, Hitler was unable to have his war, much to his chagrin. We must admit that the Hungarian refusal to march, in this regard, was more crucial in preventing a war in 1938 than a multiplicity of other factors so obviously also present. Hungary, herself, fell between two stools at Munich, because neither Hitler nor Chamberlain would champion her cause. That was left to Mussolini, who had been briefed by István Csáky, the Foreign Ministry's *Chef de Cabinet*, hurriedly flown from Budapest to Munich. Csáky stated the Hungarian case as a demand for the same treatment for the Hungarian minority as for the Sudetens, coupled with plebiscites for Slovakia and Ruthenia. The Duce transmitted only the first part of the message and the conference decided that the case of the Hungarian and Polish minorities should be settled by bilateral discussions within the next three months, otherwise the four powers would meet again.<sup>65</sup>

After the event, Hitler himself considered Hungary responsible for his inability to have his war with Czechoslovakia. When the Hungarian-Czechoslovak bilateral territorial discussions bogged down during October, former Prime Minister Kálmán Darányi was sent to Germany to plead the Hungarian case to Hitler. At a meeting in Munich on October 14, the Fuehrer was full of recriminations about Hungary's past sins. He had warned the Hungarians often, "on board ship" at Kiel and also during Imrédy's and Kánya's visit to Berchtesgaden; but Herr Kánya expressed only doubts; Hungary constantly repeated the justness of her claims, but was unwilling to gain these by aggressive means; the moment had passed; if it had come to a war, Hungary would have had all of Slovakia; and, he had cautioned Kánya that if he would not act, he would "come up short."<sup>66</sup>

When the new Hungarian Foreign Minister, István Csáky, saw Hitler in Berlin on January 16, 1939, the latter was still incensed about the Hungarian refusal and was even more explicit. During the crisis, while Poland had taken some measures, Hungary had "slept." Germany would not sacrifice herself "for friends who would leave her in the lurch at the critical moment." "In a total solution, which he would have preferred," Hitler continued, "it would have been a matter of indifference" if Hungary had occupied Slovakia. "If the Hungarians had cooperated at the right time, he could have laughed in Chamberlain's face at Godesberg," because "at that time the whole

question had only been whether to solve the problem ethnographically or territorially.” “For the latter,” the Fuehrer went on, “the matter would have had to be represented as a general Central European conflagration.” Because “his desire to get the Germans back had been fulfilled, he had not been able to wage war,” complained Hitler. It would be difficult to find a more telling testimony about the major role that Hitler had assigned to Hungary in the Czechoslovak crisis and it would be problematic to uncover more revealing information about the significant and frustrating impact Hungary had in the matter of war and peace in 1938.<sup>67</sup>

There was a multitude of other reasons for the maintenance of peace in the Czechoslovak crisis of 1938: the Czechs and Slovaks decided not to stand up to Hitler militarily; in the spirit of appeasement, France and Britain desired not to see another world war unleashed; the Soviet Union was therefore conveniently released from her treaty obligations to Czechoslovakia; the Little Entente proved to be weaker than expected; and Chamberlain’s proposal for an ethnographic solution carried so much appeal to a frightened European population — including the Germans — that Hitler did not dare avoid a peaceful diplomatic solution at Munich.<sup>68</sup> This is a decisive point. By standing on the twin principles of “peace in our time” and national self-determination, even for the Sudeten Germans, Chamberlain was able to capture the high ground of moral righteousness, in light of which a German military attack would have seemed nothing but unmitigatedly naked aggression. Hitler knew this well and that is why he sought so desperately a convenient excuse, as a bellicose Hungarian accomplice, for launching his war nevertheless. But the Hungarians proved to be unwilling to deliver that excuse or to play that role.

In this regard, most of the credit belongs to Foreign Minister Kánya. With his keen mind, he clearly comprehended both the short and long-term international consequences of every possible Hungarian step. In this spirit, Hungary acted cautiously and responsibly in the crisis. Moreover, Kánya shrewdly perceived the existence of a multitude of international linkages in sympathies and alliances, which, if allowed to become operative, could have easily escalated a German-Czechoslovak-Hungarian conflict into an East Central European war with the intervention of Yugoslavia, which in turn could have led to a major war, via Italy, through France, all the way to Britain and beyond. The aging diplomat understood as well that a German-Czechoslovak-Hungarian conflict could have triggered, conversely, a German-French-British-Italian conflict, which then

could have also escalated into an even larger war, once the Little Entente had taken its cue from the West. As it turned out, war did not come in 1938. But there is no justifiable reason to believe that it could not have broken out, had Hungary decided on a military adventure, giving Hitler a convenient excuse for unleashing his armies. That is the overriding significance of the Hungarian “no” in 1938. The tragedy of 1914 would not be risked or repeated, as far as Kánya and his government were concerned, even if Hungarian revisionist yearnings, bordering on obsession, would have to remain unfulfilled. Though war did not come in 1938, we should not forget that it would come in 1939, when, just as Kánya had feared, a Central European-East Central European war, in this case between Germany and Poland, would result in a major European and eventually world conflict.

Kánya’s motives were first of all based on self-interest — the security of Hungary — but that was precisely his appointed responsibility in the Hungarian government. He carried out his task with skill, determination, and courage, thereby, incidentally, earning the undying hatred of Hitler.<sup>69</sup> Though he was far from naive, there is good reason to believe that Kánya wished peace and security for the whole of Europe as well. He was willing to accept and even to cherish a community of European nations, existing side by side, each in its legitimate sphere, guided by the principles of traditional European diplomacy, and kept in check by the balance-of-power system. His stand against the Danubian *status quo* was counterproductive for stability in that region, but there is no reason to believe that his actions would have degenerated into irresponsible adventurism, even if Hungary had been stronger militarily. Kánya’s sarcastic tongue was sometimes out of control and he might have occasionally lost his temper, but he would never have intentionally acted against the best interests of his country.

Even Hungarian revisionism benefited from his accomplishments. Though he would have preferred another four-power conference for settling the deadlocked Hungarian-Czechoslovak territorial discussions, he consented to German-Italian arbitration, which resulted in the so-called First Vienna Award of November 2, 1938. In the Belvedere Palace, Ribbentrop and Ciano therewith awarded to Hungary the mainly Magyar inhabited southern strip of Slovakia and Ruthenia. Kánya, incidentally, gave free reign to his arrogant tongue against the participating Slovak politicians. Ironically, the demarcation line drawn was rather fair, though neither side, naturally, was satisfied with it. In any case, peaceful revisionism had made headway and subsequently Britain orally accepted the

settlement, which Kánya considered important for the sake of its permanency.<sup>70</sup>

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The August and September of 1938 represented the climax of Kánya's long diplomatic career. His complex maneuvering in Bled, his able stand at Kiel, his cautious withdrawal in Berlin, his indirect — and unheralded — peace keeping role at the Munich Conference, and his irredentist success in Vienna, all speak well for the Hungarian Foreign Minister. Yet he would be forced out of office shortly, at the end of November, as a misadventure for the recovery of Ruthenia backfired in Budapest's face. In that connection, Kánya proved to be a convenient scapegoat. He was served up, moreover, as a sacrificial lamb to Hitler for everything that had transpired at Bled and Kiel, as Hungary joined in late 1938 a growing Danubian competition for Hitler's full favor. Still, Kánya continued to be respected by the Hungarian ruling oligarchy as someone who could be called upon for advice in a difficult situation. Kánya would die tragically in February, 1945, ironically, in the whirlwind of the very world war that he had tried so painstakingly to avert in 1938.<sup>71</sup> In all, he was the best diplomat interwar Budapest had to offer, and both Hungary and Europe benefited.

#### Notes

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16. Macartney, I, pp. 209-210. DIMK, I, no. 389.
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27. DGFP, D, II, no. 221. Rátz Memorandum, pp. 3-6. Eubank, pp. 42-43, 68-70.
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33. Francis Deak, *Hungary at the Paris Peace Conference* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), pp. 77-90, 344-352, 539-549. Macartney, I, p. 109. DGFP, D, II, no. 402.
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35. Sakmyster, pp. 94-96, 150-151, 160-161, 175-178. Ádám, pp. 140-256. DIMK II, no. 188.
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37. DIMK, II, no. 301a, 294, 294a, 295, 298. NYT, *ibid.*
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39. DIMK, II, no. 288a, 305, 306. NYT, August 27, p. 25.
40. Ádám, pp. 259-260. NYT, August 24, p. 2 and August 28, p. 4.
41. NYT, August 23, p. 10. Macartney, p. 240. DIMK, II, no. 296, 301.
42. Macartney, pp. 239-240. NYT, August 28, p. 4.
43. NYT, August 25, p. 8, Ádám, p. 262.
44. DGFP, C, III, no. 336.
45. Gehl, pp. 173-174.
46. DIMK, I, no. 35, 167, 250, 448.
47. Horthy, p. 163. NYT, August 24, p. 1.
48. DGFP, D, II, no. 367, 383. Macartney, I, pp. 240-242.
49. DGFP, D, II, no. 383, 402.
50. DGFP, D, II, no. 383.
51. *Ibid.*
52. Horthy, pp. 164f. NYT, August 25, p. 1 and August 26, p. 1.
53. Horthy, pp. 164f. Pritz, p. 664. Macartney, I, p. 243.
54. Pritz, pp. 664f.
55. In fact, Hitler distrusted Kánya's treatment of confidential German information, not entirely groundlessly. During the November, 1937 visit, hidden microphones were placed in Kánya's room. His telephone communications with Budapest and Bled were regularly monitored by German agents during the August visit. This explains, in part, Ribbentrop's very cool attitude after August 23. Hoensch, p. 52, note 15. Pritz, p. 665.
56. DGFP, D, II, no. 390. Horthy, p. 163. Pritz, pp. 665-666, 675.
57. Horthy, p. 165. DGFP, D, V, no. 52. Pritz, pp. 666-667.
58. Rátz Memorandum, pp. 4-7. Pritz pp. 672-674. Another valuable treatment of the August visit is Thomas L. Sakmyster, "The Hungarian State Visit to Germany of August, 1938: Some New Evidence on Hungary in Hitler's Pre-Munich Policy," *Canadian Slavic Studies*, 3 (1969), pp. 667-691. The article contains the minutes of the Rátz-Hitler meeting from the Rátz Memorandum.
59. DGFP, D, II, no. 395. Pritz, pp. 668-670.
60. NYT, August 27, p. 6. DGFP, D, II, no. 402. Horthy, p. 166.
61. DGFP, *ibid.* Hory, p. 33.
62. Sakmyster, *Danubian Crisis*, p. 198.
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64. Eubank, pp. 74-222.
65. Sakmyster, *Danubian Crisis*, pp. 206-207.
66. DGFP, D, IV, no. 62.
67. DGFP, D, V, no. 272.
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69. DGFP, D, V, no. 272.

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71. Macartney, I, pp. 315-316. Hory, p. 72.