

# Bethlen's 1922 Campaign on Questions of Foreign Policy

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*Bethlen's 1922 campaign, especially its treatment of foreign policy questions, has not been investigated by the relevant literature so far, although it is fairly well-known that the Prime Minister, Count István Bethlen, participated in the international conference in Genoa between 8 and 21 April 1922. He returned from there on account of the need to administer the election campaign in Hungary. Convinced by the results of the Genoa Conference, he gave a realistic foreign policy programme: this fitted into the expectations of the winners, but at the same time, made a stand for the country's independence and full sovereignty. The programme refused the intervention of the Little Entente into the internal affairs of Hungary, but urged to enter into trade treaties with them. What is more, it also made a stand for the interests of the Hungarians living as a minority. All these considerations show that Bethlen urged and supported consolidation in Hungarian foreign policy, too. It was also a contribution to the 1922 election campaign of the Unity Party, and last but not least, to the development of the new foreign policy orientation of the Hungarian state.*

*Keywords: Bethlen's campaign, Genoa Conference, revisionism, reparations, Little Entente, European dialogue, Wilsonian principles, financial reconstruction.*

Bethlen's 1922 campaign, especially its treatment of foreign policy questions, has not been investigated by the relevant literature so far,<sup>1</sup> although it is fairly well-known that the Prime Minister, Count István Bethlen, participated in the international conference in Genoa between 8 and 21 April 1922. He returned from there on account of the need to administer the election campaign in Hungary. This study does not attempt to investigate and analyse the negotiations of the delegation of the Hungarian government at the Genoa Conference. The analysis of the pieces of press information on the conference is not attempted here either. In general, it can be claimed that liberal newspapers, for example, the *Világ*, criticised the work of the Hungarian delegation and found the achievements lacking. In contrast, the pro-government press, including the

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<sup>1</sup> ROMSICS 1991, 147.; ORMOS – MAJOROS 1998, 302–306.; SERES 2001, 397–441.; GULYÁS 2012, 124.

*Szózat*, praised the achievements of the delegation and Bethlen's diplomatic ingeniousness in particular.

On 23 April Bethlen informed the council of ministers about the proceedings of the conference up until then. The analysis of this is not attempted here, because the Prime Minister's intention was to inform the executive, not the voters. However, Bethlen held a press conference on 26 April. This was necessitated due to the need to compensate for the critiques that had been published in the liberal press. What is more, he also wanted to use the Hungarian results achieved at the Genoa Conference to serve campaign purposes in the elections. The Prime Minister added that the 1st committee of the conference was the political committee, though it was not called that. There were financial and economic committees, too. The financial committee dealt with questions of currency and loans, but it avoided the problem of reparations. According to Bethlen, without discussing and decreasing the amount of reparations, Hungary's position cannot be improved. However, he called attention to an achievement: the material of the English experts contained that "*the liabilities of certain states ought to be balanced in accordance with their ability to pay*". Therefore, the Hungarian delegation joined the British proposal.

In the economic committee the Hungarian delegation pursued two topics: the one was "the ratification of the Portorose Agreement, and the other was the creation of a system of preference customs in Central Europe". In order to negotiate this, the Hungarians advised the committee to establish a subcommittee to "discuss the economic relations of the successor states [...] among one another". This also proved that Hungary was interested in broadening the economic and trade relations with neighbouring countries. However, this proposal was turned down by the representatives of the Little Entente. What is more, they even refused the French proposal which was mostly similar to the Hungarian one. According to Bethlen, because the French delegation rejected the disarmament proposal of the Russians, the Hungarians thought that it would be improper to propose it again. Furthermore, the Prime Minister reviewed the activity of the Hungarian delegation with regard to the protection of the Hungarian minorities in the successor states. He also gave voice to his hope that these proposals would be supported.

Bethlen reported that the publication of the German-Russian treaty caused "great surprise" at the conference. He thought that if "*a certain turn to the right happens in the current regime*" in Soviet Russia, "*then Germany may play a major role in the reconstruction of Russia*". He also suggested that probably the entente powers would take part in it, too. If that happens, then Hungary is going to build such a relationship with Soviet Russia. Bethlen called the news that "Hungary entered into such a treaty with the Russian delegation as Germany" "an entirely delusory figment". He also added that "the Hungarian delegation neither negotiated, nor did it wish to negotiate with the Russians", but it only passively awaited the evolution of the case.<sup>2</sup> However, it is known that the

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<sup>2</sup> *Szózat* (27.04.1922), 2.

latter statement of the Prime Minister was not true, because the Hungarians did negotiate with the Soviet Russian delegation. This question, nevertheless, cannot be examined in detail here.<sup>3</sup>

Bethlen rightfully claimed that the question of paying the reparations was played down in the conference. Even so, he hoped that the conference "will pass practical resolutions" in the fields of finances, economy, and trade. However, he also expressed that it cannot be expected that "*those problems which stand in the way of the country's financial and economic reorganisation will disappear*".

The Prime Minister said that they could not reach to "the roots of the rehabilitation of the financial situation" because the question of reparations could be discussed only superficially. Therefore, he plausibly claimed that "it will be proven that until this question is handled seriously, one cannot talk about the economic reconstruction of Europe seriously and one cannot achieve results". Thus, the Prime Minister had a realistic image about these questions.

Bethlen considered it to be a major result of the conference that the winners sat at the green table with the representatives of the defeated countries, and could freely exchange their ideas about a lot of issues. Within this framework, Hungary had the opportunity to enter into a dialogue with the victorious states and also with other European states. According to Bethlen, "*this showed the considerable improvement of the European political atmosphere. Instead of the winners' dictate, mutual understanding will and ought to evolve*". He called this an advancement, but at the same time emphasised that "all of Hungary's and other countries' maladies will not be solved at one blow". In spite of this, Bethlen considered the outcomes of the conference a significant advancement in terms of the psychological and "political atmosphere".

The Prime Minister stated that the conference made it possible for the Hungarian delegation to inform the leaders of the European states about the hardships of Hungary. What is more, according to him, these negotiations could dispel "a lot of misunderstandings, a number of instances of propaganda launched against Hungary and widespread unfavourable surmises about Hungary". With regard to a few issues, the Hungarian delegation could provide explanation and thus was able to prepare a better understanding of them. In Bethlen's view, the latter was especially relevant in the case of the great powers. However, the Hungarian delegation also contacted the leaders of the neighbouring countries personally: the Romanian Prime Minister, the Czechoslovakian Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, Eduard Beneš, and the political leaders of Austria.

As a result of these discussions, Bethlen claimed that after the Conference of Genoa the Hungarian government would initiate trade negotiations with Romania, first by making arrangements for signing a compensational and then a trade treaty. They also agreed with Beneš that they would continue the negotiations of Marienbad and Prague that had not been finished the year before. On

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<sup>3</sup> SERES 2001, 397-441.

the one hand, they intended to sign a trade treaty and a traffic agreement; on the other hand, they planned to go on with the discussion of minority questions. Furthermore, they agreed with the Austrian representatives that the experts would begin negotiations already in Genoa. Then, the remaining issues were going to be settled after the conference in Budapest or in Vienna with the mediation of the heads of the governments. Bethlen added that he informed the representatives of the great powers about the problem of livestock reparations, too, and he "*urged the great powers to reconsider it*". Finally, he also mentioned that he endeavoured to gain financial support from the successor states to provide subsistence for Queen Zita and her children. However, he could not disclose more details about the merits of the case.

Furthermore, the Prime Minister's answer to the question of a journalist-- Why did we not enter into economic negotiations with Yugoslavia?-- was that the Hungarian government had already initiated this earlier, and if we receive a positive response, then Hungarian diplomacy would be open to pursue these negotiations further. Another journalist posed a question if it had been discussed during the conference that Hungary would *borrow foreign loans*. Bethlen replied to this inquiry that this had not been considered in Genoa. The conference did not raise this question; therefore, it is not relevant for the time being.<sup>4</sup>

It can be concluded that Bethlen realistically evaluated the results of the Genoa Conference that had proceeded until then. What is more, the experiences he had there imbued him with a certain degree of optimism. However, he advised the Hungarian people not to fall prey to illusions. It is true that he intended to exaggerate the achievements of the Hungarian delegation compared to what they actually were. Thus, it is understandable that liberal newspapers--the *Világ*, *Az Est*, and *Az Újság*--continued to publish their critical remarks on the work of the Hungarian delegation participating in the Genoa Conference. Some liberal politicians also criticised the diplomatic skills of the Foreign Secretary, Count Miklós Bánffy.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Bethlen regarded it necessary after this press conference, too, to expound the foreign policy lines of the Unity Party and the government in his election campaign.

The first destination of Bethlen's campaign tour, who had just returned from Genoa, was Eger on 30 April. There, he explicated his opinion on foreign and internal policies at the meeting of the Heves County section of the Unity Party. Among the objectives of the party programme, he mentioned first that "*we have to secure our national independence in the field of foreign policy as opposed to other nations*". He also claimed that we gained our national independence in November 1918 by chance, but "*we are not willing to sacrifice that any more under any circumstances*". Bethlen stated that there had been such new signs in European politics as if "*they wished to establish a new Danube confederation. We cannot participate in this confederation, and we do not endeavour to enter into one*". He emphasised that we want "*a strong, united, and great Hungary*". However,

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<sup>4</sup> *Szózat* (27.04.1922), 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Világ* (26.04.1922), 1.

"we do not want a federal, old monarchy either", because it would create "such relations in public law that would harm our national sovereignty". Bethlen also added to this that a new federation would not be desired as "in a new federation Slavic peoples would be in a leading position".

Another foreign policy objective of the Unity Party was conceived by the Prime Minister as follows: the use of peaceful methods to achieve that "the Hungarian nation should possess equality compared to the other nations". On the Wilsonian principles he claimed that Wilson "preached justice, equality, and the rule of law among the peoples" in 1918. Yet since then, we have experienced that "there is no truth, no equality, and no rightful law among the European peoples, only the victors and the defeated. (Quite so! Exactly!) All rights are assumed by the winners."

As a consequence of this, "they interfere with our internal affairs". In addition to this, Bethlen said that this "nation was dismantled and disarmed: our neighbours, however, can arm themselves without any restraint and threaten us". Therefore, "our foreign policy is set to achieve to gain our equality once again [...] and [...] to disarm our neighbours, (Cheering!), because until it happens, those who are armed will keep intervening into the politics of the peoples of Central Europe". Bethlen primarily meant the Little Entente: the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, Romania, and Czechoslovakia.

Furthermore, Bethlen explained that there was no equality in the field of trade policy either. "They interfere with our finances, and what was gained by the hard work of the Hungarian people, they wish to take it under the name of reparations. *We were obliged to sign the peace treaty; this nonetheless cannot mean that later generations of the Hungarian nation should wither in eternal servitude* (Acclamation)."<sup>6</sup>

This speech of Bethlen at the elections was feistier than his press conference on 26 April. This may have been related to what had ensued in the meantime at the Genoa negotiations. His expounding which showed an acknowledgement of foreign policy power relations but originated from national self-esteem was received by his audience with acclaim. These ideas of Bethlen are important also for the reason that they have not been discussed in the relevant literature.

The next campaign tour of the Prime Minister on 7 May targeted Hajdú and Bihar Counties. On this trip he was also accompanied by István Nagyatádi Szabó, a leading politician of smallholders, and Gyula Gömbös, too. The former was the president of the Unity Party, while the latter directed the election campaign of the party as its executive director. After the programme speeches delivered in Kismarja and Derecske, the next destination of the Tiszántúl (Transtisza) campaign tour was Debrecen. Here, the meeting of the Unity Party was held in the great hall of Hotel Bika at noon. In this speech Bethlen primarily touched upon foreign policy questions. As he pointed out, "all foreign policy aims at securing national life by entering into *treaties of friendship* with the op-

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<sup>6</sup> Szózat (02.05.1922), 1-3.

ponents of the nation and by other means". He also added, however, that this had preconditions: the nation must have adequate sovereignty and equality on par with other nations in order to have a likewise ordered social and state life, and its authority must be based on decent economic and cultural forces. Bethlen considered it important that nothing should happen in the country which may hurt our foreign policy. "No effective foreign policy can be pursued as long as the contemporary conditions of party politics prevail." With this statement he implied that the government was able to realise an effective foreign policy only if it stood on the supporting pillars of a large and united party. He rightfully claimed that the second royal putsch deteriorated the chances of our foreign policy, and gave an opportunity for a policy of intervention. He pointed out that "this opposition also exists today, this is a wedge in the nation's body, and as long as it stays there, we will barely be able to avoid a policy of intervention". This criticism was addressed to the legitimists, most importantly to the policy that characterised the campaign of the Andrassy-Friedrich party.

Afterwards, Bethlen discussed the accusation of the "Octobrists and their allies" - by whom he understood the liberal and democratic opposition - namely that the government "does not dare or want to maintain order. Yet the exact opposite is the truth." After the world war and the revolutions, order could not be restored in Europe in a relatively short time. "We also have to live through some regrettable events, which ought to pass and will evanesce, because we are keen on phasing them out. (Cheering.) However, this does not empower anybody to slander and attack the Hungarian government or to taint Hungary's reputation and to destroy the chances of our foreign policy. (Exactly! Applause.) Under such circumstances it is very hard to achieve any result in the field of foreign policy".

Then, Bethlen canvassed the foreign policy programme of his government: *"The aim of our foreign policy can be nothing else but the reconstruction of the sovereignty of the Hungarian nation, of the equality of the Hungarian nation with other nations and the casting off the yoke of the policy of intervention. (Quite so! Exactly! Boisterous acclaim.) But we can achieve this only if we stay in harmony with those endeavours which set out to create peace in Europe, with the European trends. We are not a nation living on an island, but a part of a great family of peoples, the civilisation of which is united, which is based on a united cultural, state, and social system. Under these conditions we cannot isolate ourselves. To draw a parallel, if we are in international company, we cannot loiter in white gaiters or a red tailcoat, neither can we moon about in dresses with a warrior's knot, but we have to behave as the other nations and we have to join them in the endeavours that serve the progress of humanity (Quite so! Hear, hear!) Every nation has their right to have their own way, but the possibility and right to prevail is only given as long as it is in harmony with the progress of humanity. [...] It is imperative to act in harmony with the other peoples, because this is our only future."* These were the words with which Bethlen ended this important and progressive line of thought.

In the rest of his speech Bethlen dealt with the European situation that emerged after the peace treaties had been signed: in his view, ever since then, there had been victorious and defeated, exploiter and exploited nations. Even so, he pacified his audience by pointing out that the victors would enter into negotiations with us, too, since "in this point of Europe peace has no value without us. [...] Because this "mutilated Hungary is a gravitational point of a much greater territory and the power of this gravitation cannot be undone by any means possible".

Furthermore, the Prime Minister emphasised that "*even if I warn you to be patient, it does not mean that I preach the policy of grovelling*". However, he also added that "when there is a new Europe on the rise, and new peace conditions are negotiated, we should not walk around with hand grenades, because we ruin all chances of our own policy". In other words, Bethlen urged to accept the given international situation, as he hoped for new peace conditions on the basis of his experience gained at the Genoa Conference.

Then Bethlen explained that *Hungarian foreign policy had four such direct aims* which fitted into the new peace policy outlined by the Genoa Conference: "The first is *the reconstruction of economic equality* in the whole spectrum and the reinitiating of economic relations with the neighbouring countries. The second is *the postponing of the question of reparations*. Hungary is unable to pay reparations. (Vivid acclaim.) The third objective is the protection of Hungarian minorities in those territories which had been detached from us. The fourth is the cessation of the policy of intervention by our joining to that political orientation which announced the programme of Europe's disarmament".

Bethlen also talked about these aims one by one. For example, with regard to the suspension of the war reparations he said that "*without foreign credit and loan this nation will not be able to reconstruct either its financial or economic life*". As for the Hungarians who became a national minority, he added that "it is our obligation and right to bring this question to an international forum, because the concerned states obliged themselves in Articles 47 and 54 of the peace treaty to comply with the minority treaty".

At the end of his speech, Bethlen once again underlined the need that we ought to fit into the greater orientations of European politics. "If we set our goals correctly, then indeed, with the new reorganisation of the map of Europe, Hungary will find its own place. (Cheering.) However, the precondition of this is that our internal policy should not thwart our foreign policy and that those oppositions which separate one Hungarian from the other should also come to an end".<sup>7</sup>

In his Debrecen Speech the Prime Minister pointed out that the parties of the opposition had no foreign policy programmes. On the other hand, he gave a realistic foreign policy programme: this fitted into the expectations of the winners, but at the same time made a stand for the country's independence and full sovereignty. The programme refused the intervention of the Little

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<sup>7</sup> Szózat (09.05.1922), 1-3.

Entente into the internal affairs of Hungary, but urged to enter into trade treaties with them. What is more, it also made a stand for the interests of the Hungarians living as a minority. All these considerations show that Bethlen arrived at plausible foreign policy conclusions on the basis of the negotiations and experience gained at the Genoa Conference. These realistic foreign policy analyses of the situation and objectives already showed that Bethlen supported the consolidation of Hungarian foreign policy, too. It was also a contribution to the 1922 election campaign of the Unity Party, and last but not least, to the development of the new foreign policy orientation of the Hungarian state.

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