**Today is 21st March 2019, and OTD in history 100 years ago occurred the following events.**

Hello and welcome history friends patrons all to episode 49 of the VAP. In the last episode we furthered our examination of the developing approach to allied meetings and how the return of the big three coincided with a reimagining of the previous structure. These developments are interesting for what they say about how the allies behaved at this time, and it is certainly important to examine them in the context of our narrative, but something which jumps out about them is just how safe and in a sense, mundane they appear, particularly when compared to the real life or death struggles endured by other peoples in other corners of Europe. One of these peoples was the Hungarians, who are worthy of a podcast all of their own, and who we have met several times before in this podcast.

For those unaware, in our Patreon series 1956, we examine the failed Hungarian revolution of that year in the context of de-Stalinisation and Soviet efforts to liberalise in a very stringent environment. Those that attempted to liberate Hungary in 1956 from Soviet domination became martyrs shortly after the Soviets crushed their dreams, but by 1956 Hungary was more used to the spectre of revolution and its destruction than most. In 1848 above all, nationalist Hungarian uprisings against Habsburg domination were only supressed with extensive Russian help, and this event formed a critical pillar of the country’s national consciousness for the next 150 years, particularly during the darker times when Hungarian nationality itself seemed in jeopardy.

In between the 1848 and 1956 revolutions though, there existed another Hungarian revolution which is often glossed over in the life cycle of the country, but which forms a critical additional pillar in the pantheon of Hungarian history. Not only that, but the unlikely eruption of a Soviet revolution in Hungary and the proclamation of a Hungarian Soviet Republic OTD 100 years ago testified to the fact that Hungary, in allied minds, was an unsafe and doomed place, which could only be contained. How best to contain it? By promptly ignoring Hungarian demands for a fair adjustment of their borders, and reducing the country to its smallest extent, with its Romanian, Serbian and Czech neighbours helping themselves, the allies created a monster in Budapest. This monster was encapsulated in the Treaty of Trianon, signed on 4th June 1920 and oh boy, if you thought the TOV was bad, then you haven’t seen anything yet. The historian John Mason, writing in History Today, opined on the effects of the TOT, saying:

She lost two-thirds of her historic territory, one-third of her Magyar population and two-thirds of her total population. It was the greatest blow suffered by Hungary since her defeat by the Turks in 1526. Every sector of society and every party rejected the treaty. Signs declaring `No! No! Never!' (Nem, Nem, Soha) and, symbolically, four black pieces of Greater Hungary grouped around the white body of a truncated motherland were displayed in public places throughout the 1920s and 30s.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The TOT was a national disaster for Hungary, and it absolutely empowered the right wing dictator Miklos Horthy during his years in power from 1920-44. Something else which helped to heap legitimacy onto Horthy’s regime, even through the interminable years of cooperation with the Nazis, was the fact that it was not communist, and that it rallied against the country’s brief experiment with that ideology in 1919. Throughout essentially the summer months, from 21st March until its end in August, Hungary represented the second communist state in the world, and the very first to have existed outside of Moscow. The important point to note and the reason why the event is so relevant for Hungarian history is because the terrifying impression the revolt had on the peacemakers in Paris. Hungary, like Austria, Bulgaria and Turkey, was a member of the defeated CPs, and was in need of a peace treaty which would settle her borders and formalise the consequences of being on the losing side. In early 1919, the allies viewed Hungary similarly to any other defeated power, but upon learning of the expansion of Bolshevism in Budapest, and its creeping westward tentacles, sheer fear and misunderstanding in Paris compelled the allies to essentially listen to the soothsayers like Ioan Bratianu, who insisted that they could contain the Hungarian Soviet threat.

In return, all Bratianu wanted was Transylvania. The allies gave it to him, and they also gave away other portions of Hungary which they had never owned, because Hungary was no longer merely a defeated power, it was now a terribly dangerous one, and the only way to secure this danger was to facilitate the contamination of it by its neighbours. These neighbours were only too happy to act, and as a result, Hungary’s rights, her interests and her history tumbled down the pecking order in a flash. It was no longer fashionable to listen to what Hungary had to say, and the event provided justification to grasping neighbours, like Bratianu, whose career was effectively saved by the revolution. Romanian troops entered Transylvania, and have not left since. We have seen before how the spectre of Bolshevism hung over Paris like something of a terror – it was used interchangeably as justification by the allies for their actions and as a bogeyman for defeated states that wished to reassert their power.

Bolshevism had to be guarded against, and a cordon sanitaire was suggested, where East European states would effectively block its expansion, but what happened when one of these states became infected with the virus? How to guard against Bolshevism when Bolshevism itself had flipped your guards? The answer was to double down on the strategy by empowering those guards who were still pure, and by isolating the infection. This meant opportunity for Hungary’s rapacious neighbours, and it meant that Hungary’s fate was sealed. She was destined to lose so much as a result of her fling with Bolshevism, which lasted only 133 days, and she was destined to suffer extensive punishment at the peace table, once her representatives were eventually allowed to sit at it. Speaking to my Hungarian friends today, there is still much sadness and regret that their little country was so reduced after the war. Interestingly though, there is little knowledge of how exactly Trianon came to be as a treaty, or why the allies felt justified in penalising Hungary so much.

The answer resides in those 133 days of unprecedented upheaval and revolution which ripped through Budapest. While it is not our task to trace the delivery of the TOT – this is the VAP after all, not the TAP – it is still worth our while to examine this event here, because it forms such a critical part of the allied experience with Bolshevism and East European history. It also changed the allied plans – you may recall in a previous episode that William Bullitt led an embassy to meet with Lenin in Moscow, and that high hopes were attached to this endeavour. The Hungarian explosion made this very embassy seem immediately dangerous, and all news of its aims or exploits were hushed up, much to the immense bitterness of Bullitt himself. If Bolshevism had ever seemed attractive, or if the danger it posed to the west had seemed, in sceptical minds, to be overblown, then Budapest provided the ultimate foil to these ideas. Bolshevism was the premier danger, and this danger could only be averted first and foremost by calling in allied favours, and secondly by arriving at a conclusive peace.

Therefore, of course, the Hungarian revolution did not take place in a vacuum; it occurred instead within a world which was already very fragile and anxious, and which simply could not absorb the news that Hungary had collapsed and embraced Bolshevism. Shorn of information and acting on the belief that Bolshevism would continue to spread, the allies did the best they could, but in the process created one of the most intractable ethnic problems in Eastern Europe. So many terrible traumas flowed out of the TOT, and Trianon was unmistakably born out of the chaos of the Bolshevik revolution, which only added to the sense of impending doom and threat that Bolshevism had first aroused in Russia. Thus, we are entirely justified taking this brief detour to Budapest in spring 1919, where the foundations for a new republic were being laid, and where the best and the worst of what Hungary had to offer could be found.

As was the case with the other defeated nations, Hungary crashed out of the GW under a revolution which saw the Hungarian people declare their support for the centre-left Social Democratic movement headed by Mihaly Karolyi. Before this experiment with the new could be experienced, the old would first have to be disposed of, and it was with this in mind that, on 31st October 1918, Hungary was declared to have seceded from Austria. The Dual Monarchy, the Habsburg Empire, AH – whatever you wanted to call it – was over, replaced by something which had not been seen since a brief and doomed moment in 1848 – genuine Hungarian independence. The question of what this independence would precisely look like was accompanied by another equally pressing question – what would the country’s borders look like?

October 1918 was a fractious month for anyone under the Habsburg banner, because in that month Austria desperately tried to revive the flagging war effort with a new scheme to federalise the lands under the monarchy, which for Hungary meant that it would only be tied to Vienna via the person of the Emperor-King. This meant virtual independence for Hungary’s army, civil service, judiciary and more, but it also meant that change was afoot. In this transitional period between the old era and independence, a major casualty was the country’s most renowned statesman Count Istvan Tisza a man who was, as one historian put it, ‘both the highly respected and the violently hated strong man of tradition-bound Hungary’. Itsvan or Stefan Tisza featured heavily during our JCAP, largely because he featured so heavily in the story of the Habsburg tumbling into war with Serbia. Tisza, we learned in 2014, was perhaps the most forgotten participant in the story of that event, because he played the pivotal role in delaying the declaration of war on Serbia until it was too late. This was because he had feared for the future of the country where Hungary’s Magyars played a major role, but by October 1918 this dyed in the wool Magyar was undergoing a change.

No longer did he advocate for the continuation of a Hungarian policy which left the two halves of AH equal – instead he embraced the new federalist era, in the process breaking with a tradition that had led these two halves into war in 1914. Because of his well-known past and firm identification with the new status quo, Count Istvan Tisza was among the more prominent Hungarian noblemen by late October 1918, when the call for federalism and change was replaced by another more radical battle cry – revolution. Although Vienna had placed the Budapest government in the hands of a traditionalist, true power was held by a national council, which on 25th October was comprised of key figures from the Radical and SD parties. This council enjoyed the backing of the citizenry and the civil service, and was led by Count Mihaly Karolyi, one of the richest men in Hungary, and an avowed anti-Habsburg nationalist.

Karolyi was, it transpired, the perfect figurehead for such a revolution as this – on 31st October Hungary’s national council announced its independence and the severing of the old ties which had bound Austria and Hungary together for four centuries. That same day, a group of deserting soldiers broke into the residence of a prominent Hungarian statesman and shot him dead in cold blood. As Count Istvan Tisza lay dying, tragedy was unavoidably bound up with symbolism. Here was the architect of Hungary’s botched intervention against Serbia on the side of Austria; here lay dying the man responsible for blessing the ruinous entry of Hungarians into the GW. Now that Hungary’s war was dying, it was only fitting for its author to die also, and not even Tisza himself appeared all that surprised by the outcome: ‘it had to happen this way’ were said to Istvan Tisza’s final words. Hungary’s politician of the July Crisis was dead, but Hungary now faced a brand new crisis unique to those that lived – how to rule themselves free from any Habsburg chains.[[2]](#footnote-2)

For the next four months, until his regime was usurped by the Bolsheviks, this question dominated Mihaly Karolyi’s government. A power vacuum had been left by the Habsburgs, but also by the dearth of Hungarian statesmen untainted by the old regime. Count Karolyi was the only figure who seemed to fit the bill, but who was this Count Mihaly Karolyi, and what was such a wealthy aristocrat doing leading a social democratic revolution in the name of the working class? Karolyi had not come out of nowhere – since 1909 he had led the National Agricultural Society, the name given to the organisation which mobilised Hungary’s landowning classes. These political connections, and the wealth which his family handed down to him, meant that Karolyi enjoyed a monthly income in his youth which was larger than the annual salary of the Hungarian premier.

A socialite and a reckless spender, Karolyi was not unusual before the war, but he boasted connections within his family that did distinguish him. His uncle founded the cooperative movement, which sought to mobilise the aristocracy for the good of the Hungarian people, while combining its work with a distinctively anti-Habsburg flavour. These ideas rubbed off on Karolyi, who inherited the sense of duty towards the peasant classes, as well as the ambition to preside over a truly independent Hungarian state. The Independence for Hungary party which Karolyi was active in advocated a break with tradition, particularly in the realm of foreign policy. Before the war the party found that despite its lofty surface goals and attractive left-wing activism, few were inspired to support its cause. Pre-1914 Hungary was awash with ideas, but also contradictions; fewer than 6% of the population were entitled to vote, and in the Magyar dominated portion of Hungary it was difficult to appeal to those nationalities left behind or oppressed by Budapest’s domineering policies.

Dissatisfied with these trends, Karolyi broke off from the Independence Party to found his own bloc, the unofficially titled Karolyi Party, just before the war. Karolyi was disappointed that only 20 members of Hungary’s imposing Parliament building followed him into this new venture, and it lacked much of a base of support notwithstanding Karolyi’s relative notoriety. By 1916, with the war draining the country of its patience and manpower, all the parties in Hungary banded together to work for a war-ending deal. Karolyi’s party pushed the peace platform most enthusiastically, in addition to its other pillars of equal rights for minorities and social progress in the country. Throughout the war, especially in its latter stages, the Karolyi Party was joined by the Radical and SD parties in opposing the war and urging peace. When the national council was formed in late October 1918, these parties and the person of Karolyi led the way, but as far as how to make way for an independent Hungary, nobody could be quite sure how to do it. Karolyi then found that as the days and even the hours of late October ticked by, more and more gestures of support for an administration led by him were issued from all corners of Hungarian society. The historian Gabor Vermes addressed this development, writing that:

The motives behind this strange support was not a sudden recognition of Karolyi’s abilities as a leader, but rather a shrewd move to leave the steering of the ship in stormy weather in the hands of those who, with considerable reluctance, had declared their readiness to step on the deck and seize the rudder. It was also generally assumed that the victors in the war would be more lenient to Károlyi, whose pro-Entente sentiments were well known, than to any other politician. The general consensus also held that only Károlyi could establish friendly relations with the neighbouring countries and conclude an honourable peace; in short, only he could save the country.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Thus, we see the first mention of Hungarian statesmen looking ahead in the midst of their democratic revolution to the post-war order, where hopefully the allies could be expected to go easy on them. The parallels between Hungary and Germany in this regard are remarkable, as both states even possessed SD with similar organisations and manifestos, adjusted of course to take into account Hungary’s unique circumstances. Hungary’s first revolution was marked with chrysanthemum flowers, and was spearheaded by impatient soldiers who forced the Emperor-King’s hand. Emperor Karl ordered Budapest’s loyalist governor to avoid bloodshed, which effectively prevented civil war in the country between pro and anti-Habsburg forces. Instead a coalition was set up, with Karolyi at its head, and from 31st October, the peaceful dismantling of Hungary’s union with Austria was underway. Ecstatic parades of Budapest residents thronged the city, as one participant recalled:

Who was the Brutus, the Robespierre, the Trotsky of the Hungarian Revolution?...The people of Budapest, the marketplace of Budapest, the soldier from the Józsefváros, the sailor from Buda, and the students from the Galileo Circle...the victory was quite easy, it was a joke....We put an end to the war with a flip and shook off that monster as if it were an odious nothing.[[4]](#footnote-4)

On 16th November 1918, the Republic of Hungary was proclaimed. From 1st November, once Karl released Hungary from her oath to support the Habsburg Monarchy, trainloads of soldiers began returning from the front and by 16th, the city was full of demobilised soldiers, still in a state of euphoria. It was already difficult to determine whether these individuals were celebrating the establishment of Karolyi’s Republic, or whether they were simply marking the end of the war for Hungary. Something which this democratic revolution did underline was a fact which was to become immensely important in the later Bolshevik revolution – the relative isolation of Budapest from the rest of the Hungarian country.

Thanks to the central importance of the city, in the same way that London or Paris served as an island within a state, Budapest was both admired and feared by the peasantry who constituted the bulk of the population. Budapest was Hungarian, but also international; it was reserved, housing the elements of the old regime, but it was also loudly radical. The two sides of the city, Buda and Pest, divided by the Danube River which was the country’s lifeblood, provided further expressions of division and difference within the city, not to mention the fact that the capital was filled with refugees in the aftermath of the war. Those Hungarian soldiers who were returned to Budapest from 1st November abandoned a collapsing but still technically active military front, and it was only inevitable that in the chaos which followed, citizens would be caught in the middle. The point about Budapest’s relative separatism from Hungary as a whole would be important in March 1919, when Bela Kun’s Bolshevik state was proclaimed in the city, and never truly reached outside of that city’s walls.

By the time the Republic of Hungary was proclaimed in mid-November 1918, Hungary’s borders had been significantly reduced not by allied pressure, but by the emergence of several new states all around her. Croatia, Czechoslovakia and Poland all had ethnic reasons for claiming formerly Hungarian territory, but in the case of the Croats and Czechs, the emergence of their nationally defined borders broke with centuries of history, and centuries of tradition as being under the Hungarian orbit. The crowns of Croatia and Hungary had often come as a single package during the Medieval era, sometimes with the Crown of Poland thrown in for good measure. Slovakia was itself referred to as simply Upper Hungary in Budapest, which was rightly viewed in Prague as a refusal to recognise the new dual state of Czechs and Slovaks.

As Hungary’s borders were reduced, she was placed under additional pressure in the east with Romania’s occupation of large swathes of Transylvania, and her statesmen were left to dwell in anxiety as the allies faffed around for several months rather than issue any form of recognisable final peace terms. In the absence of any final treaty which would secure Hungary’s borders and guarantee the preservation of Hungarian influence in those disputed areas, citizens and statesmen alike began to become concerned that Hungary would be forever constrained by these new circumstances, and that the injustices would be allowed to stand by an unsympathetic allied conference which did not understand Hungary’s position. To guard against this miscarriage of justice, some Hungarian politicians began to urge action, and for President Karolyi to do something practical about the situation rather than wait for the allies to take their eyes off Germany long enough to think about Hungary.

By take action, of course, they meant make war on Hungary’s neighbours to take back what had been stolen. Few were louder about this idea than the Hungarian Bolshevik Bela Kun, but Kun had one major trump card up his sleeve – according to his plan, the proclamation of a Bolshevik Hungary would be followed by massive Soviet military assistance, and through this avenue would Hungary be saved, and her true extent be properly realised. Bela Kun had a major problem though – there could hardly be a Bolshevik Hungary so long as President Karolyi was presiding over a social democracy. It was therefore up to him to make the most of his personal contact with Lenin, and to bolster his reputation. On 24th November Kun founded the Party of Communists from Hungary, the name was chosen because many of the party’s members were not ethnic Hungarians, but hailed from the country’s urban industrial working class, who frequently were not actual Magyars, but second or third generation immigrants from the Balkans or further east. With his communist party established, Bela Kun had set in motion a chain of events which was to explode onto the world stage a century ago today. The question now was twofold – first, how was Bela Kun going to transform this relatively unknown, mostly disliked party into the governing party of the country within four months, and second, just who the heck was Bela Kun anyway?

The architect of Hungary’s fling with Bolshevism was born in a Transylvanian village in 1886. Bela Kun would associate himself with the SD during his youth, and like many of his compatriots, he fought for the AH army until he was captured by the Russians in 1916. Shipped off to the Ural Mountains as a POW, Kun was radicalised while in contact with Bolsheviks who were also imprisoned, and the following year when the Red Revolution overthrew Kerensky’s republican regime, Bela Kun was afforded a front row seat to watch history unfold. Kun was captivated by the promise of Bolshevism, to the extent that he founded his own Hungarian group of the Russian Communists in March 1918, and he fought tenaciously alongside the Bolsheviks in the RCW. Kun’s enthusiasm for communism as a newly converted zealot moved him to argue for the most radical version of the Bolshevik creed, and his adherents were referred to as Kunerists by Lenin, who Kun was in regular contact with.

Evidently Lenin was thinking ahead to when Kun would become useful for spreading revolution throughout the world, starting with Hungary, and the occasion of the ending of the war granted Kun a great opportunity to assert himself in the unstable social democracy which Mihaly Karolyi had helped to establish. Kun founded his Communist Party on 24th November, having built up quite the reputation for himself in the preceding months as a figure who could speak to the disillusioned and disenfranchised, and make them believe in his message. As one contemporary recalled:

Yesterday I heard Kun speak…it was an audacious, hateful, enthusiastic oratory…He knows his audience and rules over them…Factory workers long at odds with the Social Democratic Party leaders, young intellectuals, teachers, doctors, lawyers, clerks who came to his room…meet Kun and Marxism.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Bela Kun was to apply this style to Hungary’s downtrodden and frustrated workers, but also to those citizens who were not necessarily Bolsheviks by nature, but who were anxious about the country’s future now that it was shorn of so much land. Bela Kun was louder than perhaps any other statesmen in his claims that he would restore these lands to Hungary, and that he would protect the country in the peace treaty which followed.

By the time the new year dawned, Hungary was in dire straits. Domestically and economically, the failure to implement meaningful land reform and the shortages in fuel and food contributed to a picture of misery, but the annexation of the country’s border areas certainly did not help. Much of Hungary’s best mining and industrial centres were taken by the new states, and since it had been spread out like an Empire and balanced by coordination among its different regions, Hungarians found that, like the other European empires, the redrawing of borders left them out in the cold. Perceptions began to creep in among those on the right as well as those further to the left in the SD party, that President Karolyi’s republic was not doing enough to foster genuine change. Worse than that, Hungary was being left behind by the pace of the PPC, which had already recognised the Czech and Yugoslav states by late February – didn’t this mean that the allies also tacitly accepted their borders, and consequently the reduced borders of Hungary?

It was very difficult to answer that question, because until the final TOT in June 1920, the allies never formally recognised any Hungarian Republic, thus condemning the Hungarian people to live in a state of flux until the allies felt like paying attention to this matter in Paris. So long as things were in flux, they were liable to be changed, and into this power vacuum, it was remarkably easy for Bela Kun’s party to increase its appeal in large part because they criticised everything Karolyi’s government did, and insisted that they would do everything which Karolyi’s government would not. This point is considered by the historian Gabor Vermes who noted:

Communist influence spread swiftly because the Communist party could take advantage of the country's difficult political and economic situation. In its propaganda, it could also exploit the government's rather inefficient and rudderless handling of the difficulties. The Communists drew their mass support from the unemployed and the disabled veterans, in short, from those who were in a deplorable state as a consequence of the war and the country's condition. Although these groups received the highest benefits the government could afford to pay, the Communists demanded even more. Their platform was simple and stirring. It called for the dictatorship of the proletariat; the socialization of houses, lands, and factories without compensation; for all power to the workers' councils; and for an imminent world revolution.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Another problem faced President Karolyi in that the dynamic and all-promising Bela Kun was actively poaching disenchanted members of the SD Party, at the same time as the traditional Hungarian politicians of the old school resigned in droves from their parties and from government. These resignations were covered up quietly to avoid any sense of panic or instability, but it was evident that Hungary’s political class was buckling under the strain of trying to prop up a country which was being attacked on all sides; this was quite unlike the pre-war experiences where matters moved slowly, and opposition to Habsburg encroachment constituted the bulk of their policies. Now the situation seemed to be changing on a weekly basis, and there was no way to stop the flood which threatened to submerge the country. Considering the potential which Karolyi’s regime had, and the precarious existence which it maintained during the spring, it is both a wonder and a shame that the allies did not do more to support it. For all their talk about protecting legitimate governments from the influences of Bolshevism, few were willing to lift any fingers to save Hungary from such a fate.

As these political developments had been on-going, on 20th March the soon to depart President Karolyi was presented with a note by the Entente representative in Budapest, LC Vyx.[[7]](#footnote-7) This note, which can be viewed as something of a touchstone for the revolution which followed, was really only a summary of the decisions reached by the Committee on Romanian Affairs in late February, which had ruled that the best way to avoid conflict and prevent the spread of Bolshevism in the region would be to establish a neutral buffer zone between the disputed Transylvanian area and the Hungarian-Romanian borders. The note had not come out of the blue, but for the Hungarians it was further evidence of allied ignorance of their interests, and thanks to the demand to withdraw within 18 hours from the disputed territory, the note had the tone of an ultimatum. Gabor Vermes captured the crisis situation which faced Karolyi’s regime on 20th March:

In the afternoon of March 20, the atmosphere at the cabinet meeting was desperate. It was clear that the government could neither accept the ultimatum nor resist the Entente. Acceptance would have outraged public opinion and swept away the government; resistance was out of the question because the government lacked the power to resist. The only recourse for the government was to resign and hand over the power to the Socialists. Resignation had the additional advantage of allowing the bourgeois ministers to rid themselves of their responsibilities, which they were no longer able to combine with real authority. President Károlyi began to consider the appointment of a purely Socialist government, but the decision again lay with the Socialists and not with him.[[8]](#footnote-8)

We are provided with some valuable accounts by two British officials who were on the ground in Budapest – Sir Thomas Montgomery-Cunningham and Mr F. Williams Freeman. These two men provided reports for the British official in Belgrade, who then passed them onto Paris. Throughout spring 1919, both men urged Britain to recognise Karolyi’s government, and to make some kind of commitment to resolve its border disputes. These appeals were ignored, and the two Brits were essentially forced to watch as the situation deteriorated in the country, to the point that, on 21st March 1919, Count Mihaly Karolyi announced his resignation as President.[[9]](#footnote-9) This decision of Karolyi’s to resign and leave Hungary in the hands of more radical men had been taken not just in light of the massive increase in foreign pressure from the day before. Karolyi had also decided to resign because he had learned of a frightening political development – the infiltration of the SD by the communists.

In the previous weeks, the Communists had merged with the SD, to form the Socialists, but Karolyi had not been made fully aware of this when he confirmed the party in government. Upon realising what had happened, and that the communists enjoyed massive advantages from this merger, Karolyi declared that he would not be president of such a Republic, and resigned. Matters then moved quickly, as Bela Kun connected with Lenin and announced that Soviet Councils now ruled in Budapest. Lenin instructed him to expel all SD from the newly imagined party, and to stock the country with communist Soviet councils. The communists would subsequently eject the more moderate elements of the party, to the extent that they held the important posts in the government and faced no opposition in Parliament. The SDP had been warped and shattered, the Radical Party had dissolved itself long ago – only the smallholding peasant parties remained, to face a suffocating monopoly which the communists pursued.

Initially, between 21st to 25th March at least, citizens in Budapest were clamouring for a government which would, in short, stick it to the west. Resentment and bitterness against the allied powers in Paris had greatly increased after the terms of the Vyx note was publicised, and these sentiments were echoed within the new Socialist party itself. ‘The meaning of the new trend’, recorded one socialist party politician, ‘is that what we did not get from the West we want to obtain now from the East.’ Thus, one could argue that Hungarians were drawn to radicalism because of feelings of bitterness and hostility, as well as desperation – traditional human needs like food and fuel had not retreated when larger concerns took their place, and Karolyi’s government proved unable to sufficiently solve any of them.

Hungarians had tried to play by the rules – they had waited for the allies to meet with them and address their concerns, but the time for playing along was over. It was clear to those even lacking in enthusiasm for communism that the allies had no interest in protecting Hungarian interests, so in these circumstances the revolutionary idea – that of seeking succour in Lenin’s Russia – was explored. Hungary was in many respects an ideal place for communism to take root in 1918-19, because the country was depressed in the aftermath of a lost war, shorn of its traditional linkages, anxious over its national future, surrounded by new nation states, bitter towards the allies and concepts of the ‘Western’ way of doing business, and Hungary itself contained a thoroughly divided SDP which attempted to rule within an thoroughly divided society.[[10]](#footnote-10)

There was palpable shock at the news of Hungary’s descent into Bolshevism, as though those in Paris hadn't been given considerable warnings in the past about what would happen if they continued to sell such a hopeless message to the Hungarians, if they sold them anything at all. Knowing full well that the ideology would only flourish in desperate circumstances, the allies did little to alleviate the burdens upon the Hungarian citizen, or to assure them of fair treatment and opportunities in the final peace deal. Instead there was only disappointment and suspicion, and considerable bitterness when Hungary’s neighbours all gained in quick succession at Hungary’s expense. Regardless of whether it was fair for Hungarians to imagine that they would be able to maintain their heterogeneous medieval kingdom with a republican face, or to keep down newly emerging ethnicities all around them, the shock at this disappointment contributed towards the acceptance of an extreme solution.

Bela Kun proved no more successful than Karolyi in alleviating the burdens of Hungary though; in fact he made the situation much worse, and he certainly weakened the argument for treating Hungary with any kind of fairness. From mid-April 1919, Hungarian soldiers poured into both Slovakia and Transylvania in defiance of allied demands and decisions. This was the last straw for many in Paris, who viewed the defeated Hungary as nothing more than a menace to the peace following the GW, and now felt vindicated in this view. By striking out against the unfair allied policies, it became a matter of when, rather than if, Hungary would be abandoned at the peace table. There was no question of her forces, dispirited and surrounded on all sides, actually managing to win. Although his forces enjoyed some success and even managed to set up a Slovakian puppet state in late June, this proved the high point of Hungary’s military fortunes, and Romanian forces under the gleeful direction of Ioan Bratianu accepted the surrender of Hungary’s soldiers in early August, with the Soviet Republic collapsing soon after. Before this had even come to pass, as Harold Temperley noted, the allies had already decided upon Hungary’s future, and this future represented the official break with centuries of tradition. Temperley wrote:

No event affected the frontiers of Hungary more decisively than the Socialist revolution which broke out at Budapest in March, 1919, and enthroned Bela Kun as dictator. It was partly a socialistic experiment, partly a nationalist Hungarian protest against the gradual advance of the Czechoslovak army from the east. Bela Kun finally sent forces to attack both Czechoslovaks and Rumanians, and it was this action that forced the Big Four to come to a decision regarding Hungary's new frontiers and order Bela Kun to retire behind them. This was the true and final decision. And the *finis Hungariae* – the end of the old heterogeneous Kingdom – was decreed on June 13, 1919, while the "Big Four" were still at Paris.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Bela Kun made the Hungarian equation much easier for the allies to solve, because he placed Hungary firmly in the camp of dangerous powers who would have to be contained. A year after deciding that the medieval idea of Hungary and the rights which its residents understood should flow from that idea was abolished, Hungary was presented with the harshest of all the peace treaties, the TOT. Hungary was reduced to a shell of its former self, and the grand national destiny of all Magyars, frustrated by the loss to the Turks in 1526, was forever doomed by this wound. Henceforth, Hungary was to be just another East European state, dwarfed by most of its neighbours, including the now triumphant Romania, which added an extra 10 million citizens to its population in the aftermath, and which added Transylvania to its already expansive real estate portfolio.

The Hungarian revolution was a tiny slice of action of the PPC cake, but like so many other snowballs in 1919, as it began rolling down the hill, it picked up size and traction and speed, ultimately bulldozing everything in its path, with consequences that are still felt in Hungary to this day. Distant and unimportant though Bela Kun’s regime may have seemed to those that were attempting to reimagine the world in spring 1919, their failure to heal the Hungarian wounds represented yet another strike against this effort, and fodder for the next installation of leaders who attempted to harness old catastrophes for their own ends. It is safe to say that the allies utterly failed when it came to arriving at a successful or satisfactory solution in Hungary.

But then, at least, one could have argued at the time that the Bolsheviks prevented a satisfactory conclusion, however backward this argument may seem to us. In the case of the more infamous failure in neighbouring Germany though, the final days of March 1919 are significant for another reason. The allies were arriving at the decision of precisely how much the vanquished Germans should have to pay. This question of reparations, more than any other, was to sour relations between the allies and the WR during the inter-war years – some would say that reparations were the reason we have inter-war years in the first place. The point is that reparations provided ample nourishment for those who, like Bela Kun and others after him, promised to right the wrongs that had been dealt, only to deliver, in the process, a nightmare straight out of the depths of hell. It is our task to investigate this quagmire, and to discern precisely how fair or unfair, understandable or ridiculous, the whole scheme was, so if you’re ready for another uplifting story, make sure and join me in next episode for that…

1. John W. Mason, "Hungary's Battle for Memory," *History Today*, March 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gábor Vermes, "The October Revolution in Hungary: From Károlyi to Kun," in *Hungary in Revolution, 1918-19: Nine Essays*, ed. Iván Völgyes (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), pp. 31-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid*, p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Quoted in *Ibid*, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Quoted in Rudolf Tokes, *Béla Kun and the Hungarian Soviet Republic* (New York: F.A. Praeger, 1967), pp. 111–112. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Gábor Vermes, ‘The October Revolution in Hungary’, p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Peter Pastor, ‘The Vix Mission in Hungary, 1918-1919: A Re-Examination’, *Slavic Review*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Sep., 1970), pp. 481-498. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Gábor Vermes, ‘The October Revolution in Hungary’, p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ferenc Tibor Zsuppán, ‘The Hungarian Soviet Republic and the British Military Representatives, April-June 1919’, *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 47, No. 108 (Jan., 1969), pp. 198-218; p. 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Gábor Vermes, ‘The October Revolution in Hungary’, p. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Harold Temperley, ‘How the Hungarian Frontiers Were Drawn’, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Apr., 1928), pp. 432-447; pp. 434-435. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)