

Borderlands: Hungary Maneuvers

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I am writing this from Budapest, the city in which I was born. I went to the United States so young that all my memories of Hungary were acquired later in life or through my family, whose memories bridged both world wars and the Cold War, all with their attendant horrors. My own deepest memory of Hungary comes from my parents' living room in the Bronx. My older sister was married in November 1956. There was an uprising against the Soviets at the same time, and many of our family members were still there. After the wedding, we returned home and saw the early newspapers and reports on television. My parents discovered that some of the heaviest fighting between the revolutionaries and Soviets had taken place on the street where my aunts lived. A joyous marriage, followed by another catastrophe -- the contrast between America and Hungary. That night, my father asked no one in particular, "Does it ever end?" The answer is no, not here. Which is why I am back in Budapest.



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For me, Hungarian was my native language. Stickball was my culture. For my parents, Hungarian was their culture. Hungary was the place where they were young, and their youth was torn away from them. My family was crushed by the Holocaust in Hungary, but my parents never quite blamed the Hungarians as much as they did the Germans. For them, it was always the Germans who were guilty for unleashing the brutishness in the Hungarians. This kitchen table discussion, an obsessive feature of my home life, was an attempt to measure and allocate evil. Others did it differently. This was my parents' view: Except for the Germans, the vastness of evil could not have existed. I was in no position to debate them.

This debate has re-entered history through Hungarian politics. Some have accused Prime Minister Viktor Orban of trying to emulate a man named Miklos Horthy, who ruled Hungary

before and during World War II. This is meant as an indictment. If so, at the university of our kitchen table, the lesson of Horthy is more complex and may have some bearing on present-day Hungary. It has become a metaphor for the country today, and Hungarians are divided with earnest passion on an old man long dead.

A Lesson From History

Adm. Miklos Horthy, a regent to a non-existent king and an admiral in the forgotten Austro-Hungarian navy, governed Hungary between 1920 and 1944. Horthy ruled a country that was small and weak. Its population was 9.3 million in 1940. Horthy's goal was to preserve its sovereignty in the face of the rising power of Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin. Caught between the two -- and by this I mean that both prized Hungary for its strategic position in the Carpathian Basin -- Hungary had few options. Horthy's strategy was to give what he must and as little as he had to in order to retain Hungary's sovereignty. Over time, he had to give more and more as the Germans became more desperate and as the Soviets drew nearer. He did not surrender his room to maneuver; it was taken from him. His experience is one that Hungary's current leadership appears to have studied.

Horthy's strategy meant a great deal to the Jews. He was likely no more anti-Semitic than any member of his class had to be. He might not hire a Jew, but he wasn't going to kill one. This was different from the new style of anti-Semitism introduced by Hitler, which required mass murder. A sneer would no longer do. In Poland and in other countries under German sway, the mass killings started early. In Hungary, Horthy's policy kept them at bay. Not perfectly, of course. Thousands were killed early on, and anti-Jewish laws were passed. But thousands are not hundreds of thousands or millions, and in that time and place it was a huge distinction. Hungary did not join Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union until months after it had started, and Jews, including my father and uncles, were organized in labor battalions, where casualties were appalling. But their wives and children remained home, had food and lived. Horthy conceded no more than he had to, but what he had to do he did. Some say it was opportunism, others mere cowardice of chance. Whatever it was, while it lasted, Hungary was not like Poland or even France. The Jews were not handed over to the Germans.

Horthy fell from his tightrope on March 19, 1944. Realizing Germany was losing the war, Horthy made peace overtures to the Soviets. They were coming anyway, so he might as well welcome them. Hitler, of course, discovered this and occupied Hungary, which was essential to the defense of Austria. In a complex maneuver involving kidnapping and blackmail -- even kidnapping one of Horthy's sons -- Hitler forced the Hungarian leader to form a new government consisting of Hungary's homegrown Nazis, the Arrow Cross Party. As with Vidkun Quisling in Norway and Philippe Petain in France, Hitler installed his eager puppets.

Horthy signed off on this. But that signature, as he pointed out, was meaningless. The Germans were there, they could do as they wanted, and his signature was a meaningless act that spared his sons' lives. My father said he understood him. He had no more power, except saving his sons. Without the power to control events, saving those lives cost nothing and gained something precious. In no way did it change what was going to happen during the next year in Hungary: the

murder of more than half a million Jews and a bloodbath throughout the country as Soviet forces advanced and surrounded Budapest and as the Germans fought to their deaths.

My parents were grateful to Horthy. For them, without him, the Holocaust would have come to Hungary years earlier. He did not crush the Hungarian Nazis, but he kept them at bay. He did not turn on Hitler, but he kept him at bay. What Horthy did was the dirty work of decency. He made deals with devils to keep the worst things from happening. By March 1944, Horthy could no longer play the game. Hitler had ended it. His choice was between dead sons and the horror of the following year, or living sons and that same horror. From my parents' view, there was nothing more he could do, so he saved his sons. They believed Horthy's critics were unable to comprehend the choices he had.

It was the Germans they blamed for what happened. Hungarian fascists cooperated enthusiastically in the killings, but Horthy had been able to control them to some extent before the German occupation. Hungary had a strong anti-Semitic strain but not so strong it could sweep Horthy from power. Once the Wehrmacht, the SS and Adolf Eichmann, the chief organizer of the Holocaust, were in Budapest, they found the Arrow Cross Party to be populated by eager collaborators.

Parallels in Hungary Today

Hungary is in a very different position today, but its circumstances still bear similarities to Horthy's time. The country has a [right-wing party, the Jobbik party](#), which is unofficially anti-Semitic. It earned 20 percent of the vote in the most recent election. Hungary also has a prime minister, Viktor Orban, who is the leader of a right-of-center Fidesz party and is quite popular. There is a question of why anti-Semitism is so strong in Hungary. Right-wing parties, most of which are anti-immigrant and particularly anti-Muslim and anti-Roma, are sweeping Europe. Hungary's far right goes for more traditional hatreds.

Orban's enemies argue that he is using Jobbik to strengthen his political position. What Orban is really doing is containing the party; without the policies he is pursuing, Jobbik might simply take power. This is the old argument about Horthy, and in fact, in Hungary there is a raging argument about Horthy's role that is really about Orban. Is Orban, like Horthy, doing the least he can to avoid a worse catastrophe, or is he secretly encouraging Jobbik and hastening disaster?

Hungary in a Broader Regional Context

This discussion, like all discussions regarding Budapest, is framed by the tenuous position of Hungary in the world. Orban sees the European Union as a massive failure. The great depression in Mediterranean Europe, contrasted with German prosperity, is simply the repeat of an old game. Hungary is in the east, [in the borderland](#) between the European Peninsula and Russia. The Ukrainian crisis indicates that the tension in the region is nearing a flashpoint. He must guide Hungary somewhere.

There is [little support from Hungary's west](#), other than mostly hollow warnings. He knows that the Germans will not risk their prosperity to help stabilize the Hungarian economy or its strategic

position. Nor does he expect the Americans to arrive suddenly and save the day. So he faces a crisis across his border in Ukraine, which may or may not draw Russian forces back to the Hungarian frontier. He does not want to continue playing the German game in the European Union because he can't. As with many European countries, the social fabric of Hungary is under great tension.

The Ukrainian crisis can only be understood in terms of the failure of the European Union. Germany is doing well, but it isn't particularly willing to take risks. The rest of northern Europe has experienced significant unemployment, but it is Mediterranean Europe that has been devastated by unemployment. The European financial crisis has morphed into the European social crisis, and that social crisis has political consequences.

The middle class, and those who thought they would rise to the middle class, have been most affected. The contrast between the euphoric promises of the European Union and the more meager realities has created movements that are challenging not only membership in the European Union but also the principle of the bloc: a shared fate in which a European identity transcends other loyalties and carries with it the benefits of peace and prosperity. If that prosperity is a myth, and if it is every nation for itself, then parties emerge extolling nationalism. Nationalism in a continent of vast disparities carries with it deep mistrust. Thus the principle of open borders, the idea that everyone can work anywhere, and above all, the idea that the nation is not meaningful is challenged. The deeper the crisis, the deeper and more legitimate the fear.

Compound this with the re-emergence of a Russian threat to the east, and everyone on Ukraine's border begins asking who is coming to help them. The fragmentation of Europe nationally and socially weakens Europe to the point of irrelevance. This is where the failure of the European Union and [the hollowing out of NATO](#) become important. Europe has failed economically. If it also fails militarily, then what does it all matter? Europe is back where it started, and so is Hungary.

Orban's Role

Orban is a rare political leader in Europe. He is quite popular, but he is in a balancing act. To his left are the Europeanists, who see all his actions as a repudiation of liberal democracy. On the right is a fascist party that won 20 percent in the last election. Between these two forces, Hungary could tear itself apart. It is in precisely this situation that Weimar Germany failed. Caught between left and right, the center was too weak to hold. Orban is trying to do what Horthy did: strengthen his power over the state and the state's power over society. He is attacked from the left for violating the principles of liberal democracy and Europe. He is attacked from the right for remaining a tool of the European Union and the Jews. The left believes he is secretly of the right and his protestations are simply a cover. The right believes he is secretly a Europeanist and that his protestations are simply a cover.

Now we add to this the fact that Hungary must make decisions concerning Ukraine. Orban knows that Hungary is not in a position to make decisions by itself. He has therefore made a range of statements, including condemning Russia, opposing sanctions and proposing that the Ukrainian region directly east of Hungary, and once Hungarian, be granted more autonomy. In

the end, these statements are unimportant. They do not affect the international system but allow him to balance a bit.

Orban knows what Horthy did as well. Hungary, going up against both Germany and Russia, needs to be very subtle. Hungary is already facing Germany's policy toward liberal integration within the European Union, which fundamentally contradicts Hungary's concept of an independent state economy. Hungary is already facing Germany's policies that undermine Hungary's economic and social well-being. Orban's strategy is to create an economy with maximum distance from Europe without breaking with it, and one in which the state exerts its power. This is not what the Germans want to see.

Now, Hungary is also facing a Germany that is not in a position to support Hungary against Russia. He is potentially facing a Russia that will return to Hungary's eastern border. He is also faced with a growing domestic right wing and a declining but vocal left. It is much like Horthy's problem. Domestically, he has strong support and powerful institutions. He can exercise power domestically. But Hungary has only 9 million people, and external forces can easily overwhelm it. His room for maneuvering is limited.

I think Orban anticipated this as he saw the European Union flounder earlier in the decade. He saw the fragmentation and the rise of bitterness on all sides. He constructed a regime that appalled the left, which thought that without Orban, it would all return to the way it was before, rather than realizing that it might open the door to the further right. He constructed a regime that would limit the right's sense of exclusion without giving it real power.

Russia's re-emergence followed from this. Here, Orban has no neat solution. Even if Hungary were to join a Polish-Romanian alliance, he would have no confidence that this could block Russian power. For that to happen, a major power must lend its support. With Germany out of the game, that leaves the United States. But if the United States enters the fray, it will not happen soon, and it will be even later before its role is decisive. Therefore he must be flexible. And the more international flexibility he must show, the more internal pressures there will be.

For Horthy, the international pressure finally overwhelmed him, and the German occupation led to a catastrophe that unleashed the right, devastated the Jews and led to a Russian invasion and occupation that lasted half a century. But how many lives did Horthy save by collaborating with Germany? He bought time, if nothing else.

Hungarian history is marked by heroic disasters. The liberal revolutions that failed across Europe in 1848 and failed in Hungary in 1956 were glorious and pointless. Horthy was unwilling to make pointless gestures. The international situation at the moment is far from defined, and the threat to Hungary is unclear, but Orban clearly has no desire to make heroic gestures. Internally he is increasing his power constantly, and that gives him freedom to act internationally. But the one thing he will not grant is clarity. Clarity ties you down, and Hungary has learned to keep its options open.

Orban isn't Horthy by any means, but their situations are similar. Hungary is a country of enormous cultivation and fury. It is surrounded by disappointments that can become dangers.

Europe is not what it promised it would be. Russia is not what Europeans expected it to be. Within and without the country, the best Orban can do is balance, and those who balance survive but are frequently reviled. What Hungary could be in 2005 is not the Hungary it can be today. Any Hungarian leader who wished to avoid disaster would have to face this. Indeed, Europeans across the continent are facing the fact that the world they expected to live in is gone and what has replaced it, inside and outside of their countries, is different and dangerous.

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