THOMAS L. SAKMYSTER (Cincinnati, U.S.A.)

*Miklós Horthy, Hungary, and the Coming of the European Crisis, 1932-41*

Quite often, visiting statesmen and dignitaries who met Miklós Horthy, Hungary’s head of state from 1920 to 1944, gained the impression that in questions of European affairs, he was poorly informed and quite naive. Even Hungarian officials admitted privately that what the regent said to foreign representatives and journalists was not always to be taken seriously. The historian who studies the speeches and writings of Regent Horthy also must come to suspect that here was a man of modest intellectual resources and limited political vision. Yet it would be quite wrong to conclude that Horthy was a dullard and a mere figurehead in Hungarian political life. Though he did not often participate actively in the formation of foreign policy, the policies successive Hungarian governments devised to meet the recurring crises of the 1930’s bore the clear imprint of his influence. A policy of which he disapproved could not easily be implemented, and for the fatal decisions leading to Hungary’s participation with Nazi Germany in World War II, he must be held in part responsible.

The extent of Admiral Horthy’s influence on Hungarian foreign policy did not in any way reflect his abilities as a diplomat. It is true that he did possess certain qualities that often characterize the successful diplomat: a dignified demeanor, social grace, linguistic abilities. Moreover, he possessed a certain native shrewdness that from time to time, albeit infrequently, enabled him to devise a simple yet apt solution to a problem that stymied more astute statesmen. But these positive qualities were more than balanced by other less helpful traits. The fundamental shallowness of his mind was unfortunately accompanied by garrulosity and what seemed at times an almost medieval mentality. When, for example, in 1936 there appeared in the Czechoslovak press certain articles that Horthy regarded as unduly slanderous of Hungary,

* This article is a revised and expanded version of a paper delivered at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in 1975. The research for the paper was made possible by a grant from the American Council of Learned Societies.

the regent's initial impulse was to challenge the president of Czechoslovakia, Thomas Masaryk, to a duel, since such an affront to national honor required retribution. Horthy was persuaded to refrain from this somewhat anachronistic solution, but even with countries friendly to Hungary the regent's unorthodox methods often proved embarrassing. By the 1930's Horthy had come to the conclusion that certain East European states, though not Hungary herself, could make a contribution to peace by making territorial concessions to Germany. Thus Horthy repeatedly told Austrian statesmen that, despite his nostalgia for the old Habsburg Empire, he regarded the Anschluss as an inevitable event in which Vienna should gracefully acquiesce. Similarly, on several occasions he gratuitously advised the Poles that they would do best to come to terms with Germany by ceding Danzig and other western areas. It is true, of course, that a number of European statesmen, including some in such "status-quo" countries as Great Britain, harbored similar doubts about the durability of the borders of Poland and the independence of Austria, but most experienced diplomats realized it would be unwise and inappropriate to voice such sentiments publicly, let alone to representatives of Poland and Austria. Horthy failed to grasp this elementary principle of diplomacy, and thus proved at times to be an embarrassment to the Hungarian Foreign Office.

Thus, Admiral Horthy was poorly equipped to conduct day-to-day diplomatic affairs. On the other hand, very early in his regency he developed a basic foreign-policy program that served as a guideline for him and set the rather strict limits within which his foreign ministers were to operate. This program, which in its essence remained unchanged during his twenty-four-year tenure as head of state, comprised two major tenets: anti-bolshevism and treaty revisionism. Miklós Horthy was truly one of Europe's earliest and most persistent "Cold Warriors" against the Soviet Union. His fiery hatred for the Bolsheviks was forged during the brief Soviet regime of Béla Kun in 1919. This experience must have touched a deep and sensitive chord, for Horthy in the next several decades was to be driven by a compulsion to organize a

3. When Horthy spoke in this sense to Chancellor Schuschnigg in 1934, the latter sought an explanation from the Hungarian Foreign Minister, Kálmán Kanya. Kanya explained that the Regent "speaks back and forth, and one should not attribute political significance to what he says." Lajos Kerekes, Az osztrák tragédia, 1933-1938 (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1973), p. 100.
4. Horthy Papers, p. 72. See also Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918-1945 [hereafter DGFP], ed. R. J. Sontag et al., 17 vols. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Printing Office, 1949-64), Series D, 13 vols., V, No. 50. A related problem was Horthy's tendency to speak openly about matters that the Hungarian Foreign Ministry preferred to keep secret. In 1922, for example, he nonchalantly informed the Austrian minister in Budapest of various plans that had been drawn up in 1919 and 1920 for an attack on Austria by Hungarian troops. See the report of Hans Cnobloch, 21 July 1922, Austrian State Archives, Neues Politisches Archiv, K883/2-4.