ICWA
LETTERS

The Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

CPB-2 1996
EUROPE/RUSSIA

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PART I

Historical Reconciliation: A Central European Mystery

BUDAPEST, Hungary **September 1996**

By Christopher Ball

INTRODUCTION

This report deals with an act of two governments. It is an act that is seen as a crime by some, while others view it as a step along the path of regional peace. The act itself is clear, but the reasons behind it are clouded in a mist of contrary information and interpretation. It plays itself out much the way a murder mystery or crime story would. With a murder mystery, to know that a person has been killed is actually of little interest. With this mystery too, the crime itself is of little interest. Of much greater interest, however, is the motive behind the crime and the future bearing of the crime on the parties involved.

This is the first of two reports dealing with the crime and its interpretation. Here I lay out the activities of the past three months and explain their significance as best I can. In the second part, I will deal mainly with the various interpretations of the activities that I describe below.

THE "CRIME"

A so-called "historical reconciliation" has been reached between Hungary and Romania, two countries that have been at each other's throat for over 100 years. The much-praised reconciliation came in the form of a bilateral agreement[1] between the countries. It is intended to settle many points of contention, but mainly those concerning Hungarians who live in Romania. The United States and other Western countries have praised this historic move to further positive relations and strengthen regional stability. Such a bilateral treaty with neighboring countries is a long-standing requirement for entry into NATO, and since its finalization, even Romania has been told that its chances of getting into NATO have greatly improved.

The treaty deals with many important practical details of bilateral relations, such as joint efforts in dealing with pollution, recognizing university degrees from each other's countries, and the technicalities of business relations. These are not the contentious points of the treaty, however. The contentious clauses are those intended to settle the issue of the Hungarian minority in Romania by including the Council of Europe's Recommendation 1201. Recommendation 1201 states that "[e]very person belonging to a national minority, while duly respecting the territorial integrity of the state, shall have free and unimpeded contacts with the citizens of another country with whom this minority shares ethnic, religious or linguistic features of cultural identity."

For Hungarians in Hungary, these rights are essential to the cultural survival of

1. Throughout this text, I switch between the word "treaty" and "agreement" because in translation from the Hungarian word *szerzodes*, both meanings are valid and both words have been traditionally used in English to refer to the *szerzodes*.

their brethren beyond their borders. For many Romanians, however, these same rights would seem to threaten Romanian culture and state control. This difference underlies most tensions between the two countries.

BEHIND THE SCENES: REVOLUTIONS AND DEMOCRATS

Since the breakup of the Soviet Bloc in 1989, many versions of this bilateral agreement have been discussed in Hungary and Romania and encouraged by the West. The West, perhaps most importantly the United States of America, has put friendship treaties at the top of the list of things that Hungary and Romania must do if they hope to enter NATO and the European Union (EU). The idea is that when two countries sign such treaties, regional stability increases and the foundations of democracy are strengthened. According to a September 19 *Washington Post* article by Donald Blinken and Alfred Moses, U.S. Ambassadors to Hungary and Romania respectively, other examples of such agreements are the Franco-German reconciliation, the Hungarian-Slovakian reconciliation, and the treaty between the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Greece.

In December 1991, Hungary signed a similar treaty with the Ukraine, another country where Hungarian minorities live. There was not much debate surrounding this treaty and all went smoothly. Treaty by bilateral treaty, Hungary reached agreements with most of its other neighbors — except for Slovakia and Romania, where the largest Hungarian minorities live.

In the early days of breakaway from the Soviet Union, Slovakia was preoccupied with splitting itself off from Czechoslovakia. After resolving its differences with the now-Czech Republic, Slovakia could focus its attention on the Hungarians living in its southern regions. One might have suspected that after essentially espousing the importance of ethnicity in the split of Czechoslovakia, the Slovakians would understand and respect the cries for the right to cultural identity coming from their own internal ethnic minorities, but the contrary turned out to be true.[2] The new prime minister of Slovakia, Vladimir Meciar, turned out to be an extreme nationalist with seemingly dictatorial aspirations. Since his ascension to power, there has been much repression of Slovak-Hungarians. The Meciar government has passed legal restrictions in areas crucial to minorities: mother tongue education, bilingual street signs; and language use in judicial and private matters, such as marriage.

The first post-bloc Hungarian government, under Prime Minister Jozsef Antall, led the way toward regional stability by making European and general Western integration a top priority. Prime Minister Antall himself was instrumental in dismantling the Warsaw Pact. The government began realigning the legal and social structure back toward Hungary's more traditional, western European structure. Under the Antall regime, treaty negotiations began between Hungary and Slovakia, as well as between Hungary and Romania. Attempting to follow European standards, including the recommendations of the Council of Europe, it refused to sign treaties with either country without including minority protection provisions in the agreements. As a result, treaty negotiations dragged on with these countries and the Antall government began to be seen in the eyes of westerners as impeding much-needed stability in the region.

The Antall government was also seen as veering toward excessive nationalism, for a number of reasons. One was Hungary's general stance toward its neighbors and its insistence on protection of Hungarian minorities within their borders. Another was the fact that one of the members of Antall's party, István Csurka, voiced what were considered dangerously nationalist ideas and later broke to form his own party, the Hungarian Truth and Life Party (MIÉP, Magyar Igazság és Élet Pártja). Third, when taking office, Antall made what became a famous statement. He said that he was "the Prime Minister of 15 million Hungarians in spirit." Since Hungary has only around 10 million citizens, this statement took on extra-territorial significance, and is still debated today.

Nationalism is a hard thing to define. It often seems to be more of a feeling than a clear concept. One expert, however, argues that "nationalism posits that affiliation with the nation-state should serve as the defining element of political identification."[3] It may thus be viewed as good or bad, depending on its application. It may bring a nation together as it did with Germany after 1989 or split a country in two as it did with Czechoslovakia. It may also be dangerous when used to justify violence or expansionism, as it did in Hitler's Germany. Csurka, for example, may be viewed as a dangerous nationalist when he leads his followers at rallies in chanting "Minden Vissza!" (Everything Back) referring to Transylvania and southern Slovakia, both of which used to belong to Hungary.

To Hungarians in Hungary, Antall's statement was a clear break from the old Communist line, which pretended to be ignorant of nationalities. It showed Hungarian-Hungarians that this newly-elected Prime Minister was truly a democrat who offered democratic support to those beyond the borders in a new age of freedom. The line fit well with the new government's overall activities: opening the borders, dissolving the Warsaw Pact and COMECOM (the economic trading pact), etc. In sum, the Antall government strove to break down Communist

2. I strongly suspect that this tends to be the rule rather than the exception. Minorities often seem to develop a "minority attitude," which turns them inward and consequently against any national "other," be they the majority or another minority.

3. Kupchan, Charles. *Nationalism and Nationalities in the New Europe*, Cornell University Press, 1995, p.2.

barriers wherever they were found.

To Hungarians beyond the borders the message had deeper meaning. Hungarians in Romania pay close attention to the radio for news from Hungary. Antall's statement gave them hope. I am told by Transylvanian Hungarians that, under Communism, they were painfully ignored by Budapest and horribly treated by Bucharest. The revolution provided them temporary hope of a peaceful existence. In the months that followed the revolution however, the situation worsened quickly, leading to an "ethnic" configuration in Tirgu Mures, Romania, a small Transylvanian town. There a bloody riot broke out on 20 March, 1990 over a debate concerning the right of Hungarians to speak their mother tongue in a local school. After the riot, hopes of serious change were shattered and many Hungarians were tempted to flee to Hungary to escape possible future persecution in Romania.

Antall's statement had a reverse effect. It encouraged Transylvanian Hungarians to stay at home with assurance that a truly changed, democratic Hungary would do all it could to ensure fair treatment of its Hungarian brethren beyond the borders. They thus felt more comfortable and safe in their efforts to build a free-market democracy that respected human rights in Transylvania. I have yet to meet a Hungarian-Romanian who doesn't love his or her Transylvanian homeland. Most who leave do so out of necessity, be it to flee economic poverty or political persecution. "We, the new Hungarian leaders, are democrats and will not abandon you again," is what this statement seems to have meant to them.

To Romanian extremists, Slovak extremists and many westerners, the interpretation was that Hungary's new "democrats" were potentially dangerous nationalists. They were seen as threatening regional stability by drumming up nationalist emotions and expressing expansionist ideas. Antall's statement was seen as encouraging Hungarians beyond Hungary's border to either come to Hungary or stay at home and fight against the state, be it Romanian or Slovakian. Either way, they would receive the support of Hungary. This interpretation can still be heard from Romanian and Slovak extremists today. There was also the fear that a newly-independent Hungary might try to force a border change on its poorer neighbors, reclaiming its lost Transylvanian territory.

This opinion seems to have been adopted by many western onlookers as well. At the time, westerners were skeptical of anything in Central Europe that resembled nationalist rhetoric. Also, I believe that the unexpected changes in 1989, along with the fear of what would happen in Russia, dwarfed the importance of the Central-East European region and encouraged US foreign policy to simplify its focus on "stability at all costs" while it attempted to deal with the "real" problem of Russia.

This "western view" was brought home to me in 1995 when I addressed a group of Belgian academics visiting the U.S. Embassy as part of a NATO-organized tour through Central-European capitals. When we discussed the Antall government, they immediately exclaimed that it was dangerously nationalist. They mentioned both Antall's statement and Csurka's party as support for their position. When I began to elaborate my counter-argument, the U.S. Assistant Press Attaché at the time, Philip Reeker, cut me off. He confirmed the Belgian's opinion and then changed the subject. Since then, I have looked further and have found that the opinion was prevalent among Belgians, Dutch and Germans as well as Americans.

Whatever the intent of the statement by late Prime Minister, these seem to be the most relevant and important interpretations. According to those close to Antall and to most Hungarian citizens, in Hungary, the intent was clearly not revisionist. Despite the claims of the Antall government, with both extreme nationalists in Slovakia and Romania as well as analysts (and perhaps even policy makers) in the West, this statement has taken on extraordinary proportions and has been recorded in history as a nationalist claim.

OUT WITH THE "NEW," IN WITH THE "OLD"

Inside Hungary, the Antall government was largely seen as morally good, but too incompetent and weak to lead a country in transition. By logical extension then, the trade-off in the 1994 elections was in favor of a less moral, but more competent government. Antall's ministers and advisors were largely intellectual academics with little or no practical experience. While they were true democrats who believed in and understood free-market democracy, they were often incompetent in areas of management and/or politics, where more practical, street-wise skills are needed. To further complicate matters, the first government placed only people in positions of power whom it could trust not to be communist. Unfortunately, this meant they chose other academics and intellectuals who were well known in dissident days gone by. In addition, they wanted to assure everyone that while they had taken part in the revolution, they were not revolutionaries in any negative sense. Thus they left much of the government staff unchanged and kept the economic transition as soft on the people as possible, leaving much necessary restructuring done. Though their intention was good, this lack of clear change heightened tensions between the "new democratic" government leaders and the "older" civil servants. It also caused painful macroeconomic imbalances that would soon need to be addressed.

Prime Minister Antall died in 1993 of natural causes. His "first" government was then led by Péter Boross, who was a much weaker leader. Between his taking power and the 1994 elections, Boross's successor government quickly lost power popular support. The elections of 1994 replaced these first-government democrats with reformed communists, now self-proclaimed socialists. Many other factors naturally came into play during

the 1994 elections, but the visions of democracy that played on the nighttime news proved too much for the average citizen to bear. The current government, led by the Socialists and Prime Minister Gyula Horn, came to power promising to replace ministers and other leaders with experts instead of academics, and to provide strong leadership to a country that felt increasingly unstable in its newly found democracy.

Under the Socialist-led government, discussions continued with Hungary's neighbors. Within a year and a half, Hungary signed a basic agreement with Slovakia. There was a great deal of debate over including the Council of Europe's Recommendation 1201. The United States reemphasized the importance of signing the agreement, claiming it to be a requirement for NATO entry. President Clinton even sent personal letters to Hungarian Prime Minister Horn and Slovak Prime Minister Meciar. The treaty was subsequently signed, the West praised the two countries and again expressed its support for their inclusion in NATO. A few weeks later, however, with strong encouragement from Meciar, the Slovakian Parliament began passing a series of new language laws and other ethnically oriented laws in direct contradiction of the Hungarian-Slovak basic agreement. The minorities in Slovakia complained to the Western European and American powers, but their cries fell on deaf ears. Since that time, Slovakia has dropped off the list of select countries expected to join NATO in the first round, if expansion occurs in rounds. No further action has been taken and western concern over Slovakia's undemocratic[4] tendencies seems to be waning. The Hungarian government officially complained, but otherwise business continued as usual between the two countries. The fear then began to grow that Prime Minister Horn's reformed communists were not really so reformed.

THE MYSTERY BEGINS HERE

In July of this year, the Hungarian government held a high-level meeting with Hungarian-minority political leaders from Slovakia, Romania, Ukraine, Vojvodina and Croatia to discuss future relations. As might be expected, in this region of distrust, such a meeting received heavy criticism from the Slovak and Romanian governments. It also received criticism from the west

4. In addition to anti-Hungarian laws, the Slovak government has passed several laws in the last year that restrict the freedom of speech and of press, decrease the power of the parliament, strengthen the power of the Prime Minister and reject suggestions for democratization from the European Union members.

and the United States. The meeting was seen as dangerously nationalist.

Oddly enough, the sensitive nature of this meeting was handled in such a way by the Hungarian government that it actually fed the controversy. The participants in the meeting joined together and wrote a short declaration stating their intentions in order to defuse any possible tensions. Their intent, as written, was to support both the idea of collective rights as a solution to minority-majority conflicts and the importance of further integrating their countries into NATO and the European Union. The Hungarian government virtually suppressed this statement.

Some interviews were given to the press by all involved parties, but the text of the declaration was neither translated nor distributed to western countries. Copies were not even given to western embassies in Budapest. Many western ambassadors to Hungary first heard about the meeting when they read reports from Slovakia and Romania extremists opposed to the meeting. Hungarian diplomats in Belgium complained that they had received no official line from the Foreign Ministry on how to answer questions related to the controversial meeting. They were left on their own to give individual and often differing opinions to their western counterparts. For two weeks no official statement was made and the text was nowhere to be found. The media began playing up the nationalism issue and quoted bits and pieces of the text out of context. The Hungarian ministries responded by saying that they couldn't have the text translated because it was summer and no one was available to translate it.

The West probably made the biggest noise over the matter. The U.S. in particular told the Hungarian government that it did not like this nationalist activity and seemingly purposeful worsening of relations with Hungary's neighbors. Very shortly after the American complaints were voiced and pressure was applied, the Hungarian and Romanian governments met. Shortly afterward they publicly announced that they had come to a "historical reconciliation" and settled on the text of the basic bilateral treaty described at the beginning of this report. Opposition parties in both countries were outraged that an important treaty was agreed upon with no consultation. Again, much of the debate surrounded minority rights and Recommendation 1201 of the Council of Europe. To add insult to injury, after years of discussion between the countries and their parliaments, the treaty was not only agreed to, but was going to be signed immediately with no debate. The scheduled date for signature was set for early September.

Opposition parties in Hungary demanded a special session of Parliament to discuss the treaty. The opposition called for a vote on the treaty and voiced harsh criticism of the text of the treaty for including, but then footnoting out, Recommendation 1201 of the Council of Europe,[5] for removing a section giving back to churches land and property seized under communism, for not reestablishing a Hungarian consulate in Transylvania and for the method by which the Horn government handled the treaty affair in general. An alternative treaty was proposed by the opposition, was voted on and rejected.

Opposition parties in both Hungary and Romania pleaded that the treaty not be signed. The opposition in Romania, including the Hungarian party in Romania (the RMDSZ), wanted changes and further discussion before signing. Public opposition in both countries provoked many demonstrations against the treaty.

Vienna, as a center of the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) of which both Hungary and Romania are members, was suggested as neutral ground for the signing. Romania disagreed and suggested Timisoara, Romania, where the Romanian revolution began in 1989. Hungary immediately agreed and on September 16, 1996, Hungary and Romania signed the treaty in the face of widespread public and political opposition as well as multi-ethnic demonstrations in Timisoara. Signing in Timisoara, a historically Hungarian city, was seen by many as a slap in the face of Hungary's minorities in Transylvania.

Prior to the signing in Timisoara, two different versions of the treaty were published independently by two different Hungarian newspapers, *Népszabadság* (People's Freedom) and *Magyar Hirlap* (Hungary Newspaper). The Horn government never clarified which version was correct. Following the September signing one of the papers published a version of the treaty that included the signatures of the Hungarian and Romanian Prime Ministers. This version included strong language on several key points that might actually encourage both sides to live up to the agreement.

When it was finally released, a week after the signing, the official version turned out to be weaker on several key issues, such as minority language use, mother tongue schooling, universities, etc.

On the surface, it seems as though a much-needed treaty of friendship between two historically hostile nations has finally been realized despite the mismanagement of the affair by the Hungarian government. But many questions remain unanswered. For starters, why did the government hold an all-Hungarian leadership meeting in July when they knew it would cause controversy? Furthermore, why not publish the results of the meeting instead of allowing extremists who didn't even

5. The footnote literally reads: "The signatories to the treaty agree that the Recommendation 1201 does not refer to collective rights and does not oblige the signatories to ensure, to those individuals previously mentioned, the right to the special status of ethnically based territorial autonomy." (My translation).

attend the meeting to define the public's perception of the meeting? As for the treaty, why was it suddenly agreed upon almost in private, without the usual discussion and procedures? Why did the government allow Parliamentary debate, but deny those affected by the treaty the right to speak, ignoring Parliamentary law? Why did the Hungarian side remove many of the crucial parts of the treaty that were in Hungary's favor — like the return of church property, for example? Why sign in Timisoara, a site sure to provoke controversy? Why allow two different versions of the treaty to surface in the press, knowing full well that both were significantly different from the treaty signed? In sum, why sign a treaty that is largely against the interests of the Hungarian nation in general and why sign it now?

The positive answer seems to be that the current Hungarian government is eager to join NATO and the West. Now. Furthermore, it is interested in solidifying peaceful neighborly relations, thereby thwarting the efforts of the nationalists eager to destroy the region's infant peace and democracy.

For many Hungarians both inside and outside Hungary's borders, the negative answer seems to be that the Horn government is essentially a communist one bent on dominating its own citizens as well as their brethren abroad. This view is often expressed publicly by Hungary's opposition parties in Parliament. As communists, so the argument goes, the government is committed to maximizing its own power by joining NATO and the EU, reaping great economic and military rewards for itself while the people suffer.

TO BE CONTINUED...

This is only one of many "why's" associated with this treaty. Although I don't really believe that the one and only "why" can ever be tracked down, I do believe that much can be revealed in its pursuit.

I intend to pursue it.

Institute of Current World Affairs

Fellows and their Activities

Adam Smith Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is spending two years studying and writing about Turkey and Central Asia, and their importance as actors the Middle East and the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Christopher P. Ball. An economist, Chris Ball holds a B.A. from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and attended the 1992 International Summer School at the London School of Economics. He studied Hungarian for two years in Budapest while serving as Project Director for the Hungarian Atlantic Council. As an Institute Fellow, he is studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

William F. Foote. Formerly a financial analyst with Lehman Brothers' Emerging Markets Group, Willy Foote is examining the economic substructure of Mexico and the impact of free-market reforms on Mexico's people, society and politics. Willy holds a Bachelor's degree from Yale University (history), a Master's from the London School of Economics (Development Economics; Latin America) and studied Basque history in San Sebastian, Spain. He carried out intensive Spanish-language studies in Guatemala in 1990 and then worked as a copy editor and Reporter for the *Buenos Aires Herald* from 1990 to 1992. [THE AMERICAS]

Sharon Griffin. A feature writer and contributing columnist on African affairs at the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Sharon is spending two years in southern Africa studying Zulu and the KwaZulu kingdom and writing about the role of nongovernmental organizations as fulfillment centers for national needs in developing countries where governments are still feeling their way toward effective administration. [sub-SAHARA]

John Harris. A would-be lawyer with an undergraduate degree in History from the University of Chicago, John reverted to international studies after a year of internship in the product-liability department of a Chicago law firm and took two years of postgraduate Russian at the University of Washington in Seattle. Based in Moscow during his fellowship, John is studying and writing about Russia's nascent political parties as they begin the difficult transition from identities based on the personalities of their leaders to positions based on national and international issues. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Pramila Jayapal. Born in India, Pramila left when she was four and went through primary and secondary education in Indonesia. She graduated from Georgetown University in 1986 and won an M.B.A. from the Kellogg School of Management in Evanston, Illinois in 1990. She has worked as a corporate analyst for PaineWebber, an accounts manager for the world's leading producer of cardiac defibrillators,and manager of a $7 million developing-country revolving-loan fund for the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) in Seattle. Pramila is tracing her roots in India, and studying social issues involving religion, the status of women, population and AIDS. [SOUTH ASIA]

John B. Robinson. A 1991 Harvard graduate with a certificate of proficiency from the Institute of KiSwahili in Zanzibar, John spent two years as an English teacher in Tanzania. He received a Master's degree in Creative Writing from Brown University in 1995. He and his wife Delphine, a French oceanographer, are spending two years in Madagascar with their two young sons, Nicolas and Rowland, where he will be writing about varied aspects of the island-nation's struggle to survive industrial and natural-resource exploitation and the effects of a rapidly swelling population. [sub-SAHARA]

Teresa C. Yates. A former member of the American Civil Liberties Union's national task force on the workplace, Teresa is spending two years in South Africa observing and reporting on the efforts of the Mandela government to reform the national land-tenure system. A Vassar graduate with a *juris doctor* from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Teresa had an internship at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg in 1991 and 1992, studying the feasibility of including social and economic rights in the new South African constitution. [sub-SAHARA]

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ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

Author:	Ball, Christopher P.
Title:	ICWA Letters – Europe/Russia
ISSN:	1083-4273
Imprint:	Institute of Current World Affairs, Hanover, NH
Material Type:	Serial
Language:	English
Frequency:	Monthly
Other Regions:	Mideast/North Africa; East Asia; South Asia; SubSaharan Africa; The Americas

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ICWA LETTERS

ISSN 1083-4273

ICWA Letters are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755.

The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

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