

# Mission to Survive: Hungarian Historian Gyula Szekfű as Agent and Diplomat

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THIS study assesses the wartime intelligence activities of the leading Hungarian historian Gyula Szekfű, and the controversial diplomatic role he played in Moscow after the Second World War. It is argued that the scholar-turned-diplomat nurtured the forlorn hope of mitigating the impact of military defeat by securing Soviet benevolence towards the 'infant democracy'<sup>1</sup> of Hungary. Having no illusions about the rewards of Western orientation, or about the longevity of the coalition government in Budapest, he displayed an open subservience towards the 'colossus of the north'.<sup>2</sup> Szekfű doubted that Hungary's geopolitical position could be improved for generations or even centuries to come; nonetheless, he took it upon himself to try to ease the country's diplomatic isolation. Despite his concern for the Hungarian minorities in neighbouring states, he doggedly sought to pre-empt his country's encirclement by a new Communist-inspired Little Entente. Arguably, Szekfű's deep anxiety for Hungary, inextricably entwined with his own existential fears and a powerful motive of self-preservation, contributed a great deal to his bewildering political metamorphosis. Doyen of the moderate right, he was ready to risk his scholarly reputation and advocate acceptance of the inexorable lurch to the left. In so doing, he disavowed the political legacy of the bulk of his writing. Still, instead of justifying or condemning his inconsistencies and moral choices, this article traces the elements of continuity in his thinking and in Hungarian foreign policy in general. The discussion has

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<sup>1</sup> É. Ständeisky, 'Remény és szorongás: Demokráciaelképzelések és demokráciaértelmezések', in J. M. Rainer and É. Ständeisky (eds), *A demokrácia reménye – Magyarország, 1945*, Budapest, 2005, pp. 54–91 (p. 86).

<sup>2</sup> Gy. Szekfű, 'A moszkvai út', *Új Magyarország*, 7 August 1945, pp. 1–2.

been partly prompted by a raft of recent publications about Szekfű, and by an increasingly polarized discourse about his personality, politics and scholarship in Hungarian historiography.

## I

In the concluding paragraph of his voluminous *Magyar Történet* (*Hungarian History*, 7 vols, 1929–34; 5 vols, 1935–36), ‘Hungary’s foremost modern historian’,<sup>3</sup> the conservative Gyula Szekfű, described the brief Bolshevik experience of 1919 as the ‘the lowest point ever’<sup>4</sup> in the nation’s history. He regarded this national nadir, which he habitually compared with the disaster of Mohács in 1526,<sup>5</sup> as the work of a ‘tiny minority’.<sup>6</sup> All the same, he mercilessly chastised the whole of Hungarian society for its inertia and incohesion. He blamed the urban population, the gentry, the aristocracy and the peasantry in equal measure for bringing ‘eternal shame’<sup>7</sup> upon the nation by their meek submission to such a destructive force. During his long conflict-ridden academic career, Szekfű frequently revisited and revised his original thesis about the historical causes of Hungary’s lengthy decline and ensuing collapse. Yet his profound revulsion at the ‘half-educated prophets’, ‘pretentious cranks’ and ‘radical desperadoes’<sup>8</sup> of the two revolutions in 1918–19 remained one of the most constant and defining features of his highly evocative, emotionally charged historical writing.

Similarly incessant, at least until 1945, was the conservative historian’s damning of the Soviet Union: ‘By eradicating the Russian intelligentsia, which alone had the courage and conviction to resist feverish Communist hallucinations, Soviet power sank to the level of Tartar rule, solely relying on arms and the weaponry of intimidation.’<sup>9</sup> No one could have guessed that the writer of these words, a much maligned but celebrated figure of interwar Hungary, would ever become reconciled to Communist dictatorship and Soviet expansion in Hungary. That he would accept an active public role under such conditions was something that his friends and his army of admirers could never have imagined in their wildest dreams.

<sup>3</sup> C. A. Macartney, *October Fifteenth: A History of Modern Hungary, 1929–1945*, 2 vols, Edinburgh, 1957, 1, p. 380.

<sup>4</sup> B. Hóman and Gy. Szekfű, *Magyar Történet*, 3rd edn, 5 vols, Budapest, 1936, 5, p. 604.

<sup>5</sup> Gy. Szekfű, *Három nemzedék: Egy hagyaték kor története*, Budapest, 1920, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Hóman and Szekfű, *Magyar Történet*, 5, p. 603.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 604.

<sup>8</sup> Gy. Szekfű, *Rövid Magyar Történet, 1606–1939*, Budapest, 2002, p. 534; J. Gyurgyák, ‘Szekfű Gyula nemzetszemlélete’, in M. Ormos (ed.), *Magyar Évszázadok*, Budapest, 2003, pp. 286–310 (p. 304).

<sup>9</sup> Gy. Szekfű, *Történetpolitikai tanulmányok*, Budapest, 1924, pp. 20–21.

## II

When the contemporary author László Németh mischievously asserted in 1940 that Szekfű 'always sided with power',<sup>10</sup> he was being unduly harsh. Nevertheless, his words contained a kernel of truth. Since the First World War, Szekfű had been not only a regime-friendly historian but, in the eyes of many, the most influential publicist of an entire historical epoch. His vast scholarly output — including two thousand pages of the co-authored, multi-volume *Magyar Történet*, a key source for all students of Hungarian history now as then — brimmed with dissuasive examples of failed resistance, not to mention sorry tales of the purposeless existence of political exiles. At the same time, the pro-Habsburg Catholic scholar praised to the hilt the wisdom of compromise and the art of survival under foreign rule. His real heroes, such as Count István Széchenyi and Ferenc Deák, made a virtue of necessity: they pursued their national ambitions by acquiescing in Hungary's limited sovereignty and focusing on the interests of the state.

Even so, Németh's unflinching criticism of Szekfű's ingratiating ways, aired as it was at the outset of the Second World War, seemed inopportune and inapposite. For Szekfű was not cowed by the Nazis. In fact, he had felt obliged to rethink his whole pro-German historical construct in view of the dangers posed to Hungary by the Third Reich. Between 1936 and 1939, he was one of the very few prominent members of the political elite to notice and explicitly warn of the rapidly 'gathering dark clouds'<sup>11</sup> over Hungary, the 'atmospheric pressure' on small states and the ever greater 'national dangers' caused by 'evil foreign propaganda'.<sup>12</sup>

It could be held that Szekfű was still close to officialdom, being the recipient of the Grand Prix of the Hungarian Academy as late as 1943. With hindsight, though, the decision to award the prize to him, rather than to his co-author Bálint Hóman, a government minister known for his German sympathies, appears to have been more of a gesture to the West, showcasing Hungary's surviving pluralism, than a reward for political loyalty.<sup>13</sup> From the end of the 1930s, Szekfű was a respected and tolerated

<sup>10</sup> L. Németh, *Sorskérdések*, Budapest, 1989, pp. 515–21.

<sup>11</sup> Gy. Szekfű, preface, in Gy. Szekfű (ed.), *Mi a Magyar?*, Budapest, 1939.

<sup>12</sup> The word 'evil' was crossed out by the author on the final proofs: Budapest, National Széchenyi Library (hereafter, OSZK) manuscript collection, Analekta 5650, corrected proofs of Gy. Szekfű's articles; Gy. Szekfű, 'Nem vagyunk bujdosók', *Magyar Szemle*, 32, 1938, pp. 393–95.

<sup>13</sup> G. Újváry, 'A végtelenben újra találkoznak: Szekfű Gyula és Hóman Bálint párhuzamos, majd elváló életpályája', in R. Paksa (ed.), *Szekfű Gyula és nemzedéke a magyar történetírásban*, Budapest, 2007, pp. 43–77 (p. 67).

opponent, if no longer a supporter, of the Hungarian regime. In 1942, the peasant writer Péter Veres described him as ‘chief of staff’<sup>14</sup> amongst conservative critics of the government, but another left-wing publicist, József Darvas, came nearer to the truth when he characterized the historian as a leader without followers.<sup>15</sup> Szekfű himself invariably denied belonging to any group, whereas in private he acknowledged that, prodded by Count István Bethlen, he had dutifully turned to political journalism so as to provide some ‘intellectual leadership’<sup>16</sup> in the editorial office of the *Magyar Nemzet*. Be that as it may, his calls for social reform and political democratization were aptly termed ‘preaching in the wilderness’ by his British friend C. A. Macartney.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, his journalism earned him the displeasure of Miklós Kállay’s government. Whilst Szekfű may have continued to enjoy a privileged status and the protection of friends in high places, his activities, particularly with regard to his British contacts, were carefully monitored by Hungarian counter-intelligence.<sup>18</sup> Characteristically, the Prime Minister had to intervene personally in order to silence him.

For the first time in his life, Szekfű found himself in opposition. It should also be noted, for the sake of historical accuracy, that the only administration with which Szekfű ever identified fully, publicly and steadfastly was that of Count Bethlen between 1921 and 1931. Otherwise, his attitude to political authority was prone to change almost as regularly, if not quite as often, as his historical thesis. However, for all the twists and turns of his academic and political career, there was a strict logic and a certain consistency to his work, which even his fiercest detractors could not deny.

In a groundbreaking essay, Szekfű argued that historians should always observe and criticize the functioning of the state from a distance, scrupulously refraining from becoming ‘scientific bureaucrats’ or ‘party thinkers’.<sup>19</sup> He issued a dire warning especially to those involved in the writing of political history:

<sup>14</sup> I. Z. Dénes, *Szekfű Gyula*, Budapest, 2001, p. 132.

<sup>15</sup> P. Hatos, ‘Az öreg Szekfű Gyula (1945–1955)’, *Kommentár*, 5, 2011, 2, pp. 40–59 (p. 51).

<sup>16</sup> Dénes, *Szekfű Gyula*, p. 165.

<sup>17</sup> Macartney, *October Fifteenth*, 2, p. 107.

<sup>18</sup> I. Ujszászy, *Vallomások a holtak házából: Ujszászy István vezérőrnagynak a 2. V. Osztály és az Államvédelmi Központ vezetőjének az ÁVH fogságában írott feljegyzései*, Budapest, 2007, p. 90.

<sup>19</sup> Gy. Szekfű, ‘A politikai történetírás’, in B. Hóman (ed.), *A magyar történetírás új útjai*, Budapest, 1932, pp. 397–444 (p. 415).

According to the time-honoured political development of the nineteenth century, members of a party are subject to strict discipline [...]. The creative historian is choked by the stifling air of partisanship. If anyone, we understand the despairing outburst of István Széchenyi: 'I am going mad; they are trying to make me into a party man!' As a member of a political organization the historian willingly accepts the narrowing of his horizons and loses his judgement; there are only rare exceptions, such as Mommsen, whose genius could break out of such massive constraints.<sup>20</sup>

In line with this statement, Szekfű considered participation in parliamentary life or party politics to be improper as well as 'demeaning'<sup>21</sup> for a university teacher. True to his old-fashioned, somewhat patrician view of independent scholarship, between the wars he proudly resisted the lure of government office. Yet his writing was anything but apolitical, detached or purely academic. When in May 1943, on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday, his colleagues at the *Magyar Szemle* hailed him as 'the nation's educator' and '*Praeceptor Hungariae*',<sup>22</sup> they were saluting the political writer and editor, the conservative national icon, not the politically aloof scholar that Szekfű lauded as an example for himself, and for others exploring the past, to follow. The acerbic critic Németh went considerably further, portraying Szekfű during the Second World War as Hungary's 'most formidable politician of the last twenty years, albeit without his own party organization or a ministerial portfolio'.<sup>23</sup> This deliberate exaggeration of the historian's political influence was an overt dig at his integrity as a scholar by an intellectual adversary. Nonetheless, Szekfű patently failed to live up to his own ideal of erudite detachment and impartiality. Nor were his ritual protestations of political independence entirely credible. For all his purist intentions as a historian, he was mired in politics for much of his life.

Despite his rising unease about Hungarian foreign policy in the 1930s, Szekfű was not shy of appearing abroad as an apologist of interwar Hungary. As late as 1939–40, in a short survey penned for British readers, but never published in English, he proceeded to challenge any notion of White Terror in his country. He called it a fabrication of politicians in exile and of émigré authors. In his one-sided, uncompromising assessment, 'there was only

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 415–16.

<sup>21</sup> Gyurgyák, 'Szekfű Gyula nemzetszemlélete', p. 293.

<sup>22</sup> L. Gogolák, 'Nemzetpolitika', *Magyar Szemle* special edition, *Szekfű Gyula a történetíró nemzetnevelő 60. Születésnapjára*, Budapest, 1943, pp. 52–63 (p. 53).

<sup>23</sup> Németh, *Sorskérdések*, pp. 565–66.

Red Terror'<sup>24</sup> in Hungary after the Great War. Whilst candidly admitting the serious shortcomings of Hungarian parliamentary democracy, Szekfű harped on the achievements of the Regent, Miklós Horthy, and the Prime Minister, Count Bethlen, in consolidating the country subsequent to a 'period of seemingly permanent and hopeless chaos'.<sup>25</sup> He had every reason to fear that Hungary would once again be plunged into turmoil, and he was openly angling for Western sympathy. Notwithstanding the changes in international affairs, Szekfű gave the impression of being reluctant to tone down his animosity wherever Communism was concerned. In 1936, he went so far as to equate the political system of the Soviet Union with those of fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. In the influential *Magyar Szemle*, a quality journal that was the voice of moderate conservatism, he wrote: 'On Russian, German and Italian soil a new political elite is in the making, which is assisting the total elimination of the old political classes and the introduction of dictatorship and party absolutism'.<sup>26</sup> In a calculated attempt to diminish the allure of all such alien political experiments, Szekfű appealed to Hungarian nationalism and traditional anti-German sentiment:

On closer inspection, the political selection process adopted by these party-run states is not so very different from that of Austrian imperial absolutism; in both cases it was dependability, or at least the pretence of it, and submission to the leader's will that strike one as the decisive principles. The only difference may be that in the age of Metternich the individual's advancement was hampered by bureaucratic procedures and formalities, whilst today's dictatorships reward some uneducated people from the lowest rungs of the social ladder, enabling them to dispose of the greatest assets of their nation.<sup>27</sup>

Such an unflattering comparison between the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century and Austrian imperial rule may seem surprising from an eminent Habsburg scholar, who in 1909 started his historical studies, and thus his slow but sure advancement in the state bureaucracy, as an archivist at the Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv in Vienna. He breathed

<sup>24</sup> Szekfű, *Rövid Magyar Történet*, p. 533.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 530.

<sup>26</sup> OSZK manuscript collection, Fond 7/2255, miscellaneous articles by Gy. Szekfű from the *Magyar Szemle*; Gy. Szekfű, 'Politikai érzékünk társadalmi alapjairól', *Magyar Szemle*, 26, 1936, 4, p. 305.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

the air of the *Kaiserstadt* for seventeen years, from 1908 to 1925, and also married an Austrian. Even his first employment by the Hungarian Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs was linked to his work in imperial Vienna. In May 1919, Szekfű was chosen as one of the archivists responsible for the separation of the archives of the joint state, the *Gesamttmonarchie*, and for the division of documents between Austria and Hungary. His hand in this laborious operation earned him official recognition and financial reward at home in 1921–22.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, in his most acclaimed academic book, Szekfű described the *Ausgleich* of 1867, the creation of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, as the high point of Hungarian history, in utter contrast to the Bolshevik experience of 1919.<sup>29</sup>

Fittingly, he held on to his positive, though not completely rose-tinted, view of the Dual Monarchy even during his politically more ambiguous old age. In Moscow in March 1948, he demanded the dismissal of his First Secretary, Imre Horváth, because of a tactless anti-Habsburg tirade on the hundredth anniversary of the 1848 Revolution, which provoked a minor diplomatic incident with the Head of the Austrian Legation.<sup>30</sup> In his official response to his foreign colleague, Szekfű felt obliged to criticize the absolutism of members of the '*domus Austriaca*' (House of Austria), and as a sop to the left he paid lip service to the Magyar independence tradition,<sup>31</sup> but he was only really exercised by the blatant misuse of history and the revolutionary claptrap on the part of his own staff. Insignificant as this diplomatic episode may be, it is a telling example of the constancy in Szekfű's thought process and the strength of his character. Curiously, the offending subordinate was one of the Communist Party's stooges who reported to Budapest and who had succeeded in terrifying the entire Hungarian Legation in Moscow. The professor painstakingly sought to avoid any political collisions with the Communists, but he was not intimidated by such a young uneducated upstart; nor was he repentant about his former Austrophile outlook and pro-Habsburg reputation.

<sup>28</sup> Budapest, Hungarian National Archives (hereafter, MOL), K 27 116R/120 and K 27 38R/56, Cabinet records of 1 July 1921 and 7 September 1922, detailing Szekfű's promotion to the governmental rank of councillor (Miniszteri Osztálytanácsos), with an increase in salary in recognition of his sterling work in Vienna.

<sup>29</sup> Hóman and Szekfű, *Magyar Történet*, 5, p. 465.

<sup>30</sup> MOL, XIX-J-1-u, box 75, Szekfű papers, collections of senior Foreign Ministry officials, N. Bischoff to Gy. Szekfű, Moscow, 16 March 1948; Gy. Szekfű to N. Bischoff, Moscow, 19 March 1948; I. Horváth to Gy. Szekfű, Moscow, 19 March 1948; Gy. Szekfű to I. Horváth, 26 March 1948.

<sup>31</sup> MOL, XIX-J-1-u, box 75, Szekfű papers, unsigned draft of letter by Gy. Szekfű to N. Bischoff, Moscow, 17 March 1948.



In any event, the subtle shifts in Szekfű's historical perspectives on Germany and Austria are thoroughly documented in the literature. His invocation in 1936 of the Hungarian independence tradition, which he had subjected to copious criticism in his earlier writing, is easily understood in the light of his steadily growing anti-Nazi sentiment during the 1930s. Far more puzzling is his dramatic political U-turn in 1945. When facing the same red menace as in 1919, this dyed-in-the-wool anti-Communist scholar was approached about becoming the chief diplomatic representative of Hungary in Stalin's Moscow and, to the horror of many, he readily accepted the invitation. In October 1945, he was duly appointed by the heavily left-leaning Hungarian coalition government to head the country's reopened Legation in Moscow. Then, in May 1948, he was designated as the first Hungarian Ambassador to the Soviet Union.

On the surface, Szekfű's nomination as Minister in Moscow was one of the most bizarre political appointments of the whole coalition era in Hungary. It baffled commentators at the time, and it remains a troubling issue in Hungarian historiography. In particular, the reason why Szekfű came to take this diplomatic post is the subject of much futile speculation and moralizing. Some deem it a flagrant act of perfidy. 'His role after 1945 we can't forget', thundered an émigré historian in a tone of righteous indignation shortly before 1989.<sup>32</sup> Since the collapse of Communism, the chorus of critics has got louder still. The riddle of how this *fehér Szekfű* (literally, 'white carnation') turned into a *vörös Szekfű* ('red carnation') acquired a fresh importance during the 1990s. As a result, the historian's deference towards great powers has been reassessed, in the light of his diplomatic role, as a character flaw. His dealings with the Soviets have been seen as opportunism or cowardice rather than pragmatism.<sup>33</sup> Whether the wavering Szekfű was actually persuaded to go to Moscow by his wife<sup>34</sup> or his friends,<sup>35</sup> his decision is construed — even in an otherwise comparatively sympathetic study — as a telltale sign of his malleability.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> A. Czettler, 'Szekfű Gyula és a magyar értelmiség', in É. Saáry (ed.), *Erővonalak*, Zürich, 1987, pp. 31–50 (p. 31).

<sup>33</sup> I. Z. Dénes, *Európai mintakövetés – nemzeti öncélulás: értékvilág és identitáskeresés a 19–20. századi Magyarországon*, Budapest, 2001, p. 167; Dénes, *Szekfű Gyula*, pp. 24–27; see also, É. Standeisky, "'Morális nyugtalanság és féltő gond": A demokrata Szekfű Gyula', *Múltunk*, 53, 2008, 4, pp. 73–109 (p. 98).

<sup>34</sup> J. Szövérfy, 'Hungary: Satellite State', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 44, 1955, 175, pp. 271–80 (p. 277).

<sup>35</sup> Imre Kovács claimed that he had persuaded Szekfű to take the post in Moscow: I. Kovács, *Magyarország megszállása*, Budapest, 1990, p. 307.

<sup>36</sup> D. Szőke, 'Megjegyzések Szekfű Gyula demokrácia felfogásához 1945-ben', in J. Angi



Some works on Szekfű simply bypass this contentious period of his life, explaining it away as an aberration or as the hapless blundering of an ageing, physically frail man. Others specifically dwell on the motives of submission and cynicism in his political metamorphosis,<sup>37</sup> drawing on a vast store of pungent comments by Szekfű's contemporary opponents. One of these, the Prince Primate, Cardinal Mindszenty, reflecting on the Catholic historian's seeming conversion to socialism and on his new 'democratic' credo, remarked acidly: 'Either he is lying now or he was lying before.'<sup>38</sup>

In stark contrast, it has been claimed that Szekfű was driven to accept the job in Moscow by an honourable desire to track down his friend and sometime patron Count Bethlen, and to free him from Soviet captivity.<sup>39</sup> There is plenty to support this favourable reading of his intentions. The fact that Szekfű actively searched for Bethlen, and repeatedly tried to effect his release from the Soviets, is borne out by documentary evidence.<sup>40</sup> He also passed on a message and three letters to Viacheslav Molotov, the Soviet Foreign Minister, from Bethlen's wife.<sup>41</sup> He endeavoured to forward a package, too, but the Soviets refused to send it.

The attempted historical rehabilitation of the 'old Szekfű' in recent years has, however, little to do with such personal matters. There has been a flurry of publications extolling Szekfű's post-war writing about democracy. In 1998, a small but judicious selection of the memoranda written by him and his secretaries in Moscow was published by the Hungarian National Archives, accompanied by a useful if brief essay by the editor, praising the professionalism of Szekfű as a diplomat.<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately, this slim volume did not include all the relevant Foreign Ministry documents, and was not followed up by further studies of his part in Soviet-Hungarian relations or his views on other important aspects of Hungarian foreign policy. Consequently, the latest reappraisals of this key period in Szekfű's

and J. Barta (eds), *Emlékkönyv L. Nagy Zsuzsa 70. születésnapjára*, Debrecen, 2000, pp. 483–95 (p. 489).

<sup>37</sup> Hatos, 'Az öreg Szekfű Gyula', p. 44.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> M. Lackó, 'Szekfű Gyula és kortársai', in M. Lackó (ed.), *A két világháború közötti Magyarországról*, Budapest, 1984, pp. 375–403 (pp. 380–81).

<sup>40</sup> MOL, XIX-J-1-j KÜM TÜK, box 24, memorandum by I. Horváth, First Secretary of the Hungarian Legation, about a discussion between Szekfű and Andrei Vlasov, Head of the Balkan Department of the Soviet Foreign Ministry, on the subject of Hungarian prisoners of war, Moscow, 14 May 1946.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Gy. Lázár, *Szekfű Gyula követ és a moszkvai magyar követség jelentései (1946–1948)*, Budapest, 1998.

life have mainly relied on his work as a publicist and historian. In discussing his famous/infamous *Forradalom után* (*After the Revolution*, 1947) — a ‘panegyric of the Soviet system’<sup>43</sup> combined with a devastating critique of interwar Hungary, which established his post-war reputation as a Communist ‘fellow traveller’ — Éva Ständeisky challenges the charge of collaboration. She depicts Szekfű as a highly adaptable, pragmatic individual, who always changed with the times. In this more benign portrayal, Szekfű was motivated all along by an acute fear of renewed violence and a vague hope of ‘national salvation’.<sup>44</sup> Instead of looking at the political choices made by Szekfű, which would be virtually unconscionable today, his present apologists have striven to shift the focus of the debate to the disillusioned historian’s evaluation of the mistakes of interwar Hungary, and to his interpretations of democracy, that are still valid.

On balance, the reasons behind Szekfű’s startling transformation from conservative historian to pro-Soviet diplomat are many and varied, making it difficult to unravel his personal and intellectual motives for accepting Communist patronage and high office. Undoubtedly, he contemplated the future with trepidation; yet he took the brave step of entering the foreign service of a country without an independent foreign policy, impelled by a deep, patriotic sense of duty. Beyond acknowledging this, there is no point in seeking either to justify the unjustifiable, or to enter into protracted general discourse along the lines of current Hungarian works on morality and political realism. After all, the majority of the educated Hungarian middle class chose similarly pragmatic routes to political and existential survival following the war, especially during the years of late Stalinism. Admittedly, most of his past political friends baulked at endorsing Communist rule, or friendly relations with Moscow, but Szekfű was never deterred by the unpopularity of his stance. As a young historian, already under fire in 1916, he had observed caustically: ‘In this country usually the best patriots are branded as traitors.’<sup>45</sup> Although no lover of the limelight, Szekfű had become a target of nationalist indignation well before 1945, and was not averse to stirring antagonism and resentment. Accordingly, this article aims principally to explore his mission in Moscow, investigating how he tried to represent Hungary’s interests against all the odds, and how

<sup>43</sup> J. Lukács, book review, *American Slavic and East European Review*, 8, 1949, 1, pp. 73–75 (p. 75).

<sup>44</sup> Ständeisky, “Morális nyugtalanság és féltő gond”, p. 98; Ständeisky, ‘Remény és szorongás’, pp. 78, 81–83, 86.

<sup>45</sup> Gyurgyák, ‘Szekfű Gyula nemzetszemlélete’, p. 286.

far he succeeded, without glorifying or doubting his political wisdom in 'reconciling himself with the inevitability of a Soviet era'.<sup>46</sup>

Nevertheless, another truly baffling question cannot be ignored before Szekfű's achievements as an envoy are assessed; namely, why was he offered this crucial post? What made him the right man at such a critical political juncture in the nation's history as 1945? Why was a pro-Soviet politician, or a seasoned career diplomat, not selected to essay the extremely delicate task of damage limitation by wooing Stalin? What made a historian, who regarded Communism as an 'Asian-Russian' form of tyranny and as the 'apotheosis of materialism and human selfishness',<sup>47</sup> a suitable candidate to convince the Soviets of the Hungarian public's new-found Russophilia? How compelling was Szekfű, in 1946, when assuring his hosts that his compatriots no longer harboured any ill will or prejudices towards the Soviets?<sup>48</sup> His previously vociferous anti-Bolshevism apart, what made a devout Catholic intellectual, famed for his admiration of German civilization, competent to represent Hungarian interests in the Soviet Union? Even discounting his close personal links to leading conservative statesmen, such as Count Bethlen who died in Soviet captivity, Szekfű embodied nearly everything the new political elite despised about the Horthy epoch.

Equally, why did the Communists endorse his appointment at the very time when Hóman, the co-author of his magnum opus, was sentenced to life imprisonment?<sup>49</sup> For Szekfű handed over his diplomatic credentials to Molotov in the Kremlin on the same day that his colleague and former friend was facing the People's Tribunal in Budapest.<sup>50</sup> As Imre Kovács has pointed out, the fate of their literary works to a large extent resembled their personal fortunes: the early volumes of their joint history of Hungary, covering the medieval period and written by Hóman, were sent back to the publisher and destroyed, whereas the politically more sensitive later volumes by Szekfű remained freely available on library shelves.<sup>51</sup> Above all, there is a sharp contrast in the closing stages of the two men's lives. Whilst Szekfű was combing the depleted shops of the Soviet capital for smoked

<sup>46</sup> Lukács, book review, p. 75.

<sup>47</sup> Gyurgyák, 'Szekfű Gyula nemzetszemlélete', p. 306.

<sup>48</sup> MOL, XIX-J-42-a, box 8, memorandum by Gy. Szekfű about the possibility of sending a delegation of Hungarian clerics to Moscow, 31 July 1946; Lázár, *Szekfű Gyula követ*, p. 99.

<sup>49</sup> Újváry, 'A végtelenben újra találkoznak', pp. 67–68.

<sup>50</sup> Hatos, 'Az öreg Szekfű Gyula', p. 44.

<sup>51</sup> Kovács, *Magyarország megszállása*, p. 268.

salmon, caviar and coffee, complaining of ‘rocketing prices’,<sup>52</sup> Hóman was languishing in prison in Vác, slowly dying of illness and malnutrition. Szekfű’s wife, who suffered from the Russian climate, reputedly received a polar bear coat as a personal gift from Molotov as a token of his friendly concern. Meanwhile, the emaciated Hóman was allegedly refused medical treatment by the prison doctor.<sup>53</sup>

Anecdotal details aside, the long parallel histories of these two scholars diverged completely at the end. In spite of poor health, Szekfű lived for nine more years.<sup>54</sup> In March 1952, in a profusely grateful letter to Mátyás Rákosi, the historian thanked the Communist dictator both for his medical cure and for his professional survival.<sup>55</sup> In a supremely sycophantic gesture, he pledged to support the Communist leader during the show trial of the Hungarian Foreign Minister, László Rajk, in 1949.<sup>56</sup> Three years afterwards, Szekfű even sent Rákosi a dedicated copy of his last book, dealing with the miserable concluding phase in the life of the national hero Lajos Kossuth, appropriately bound in red cloth.<sup>57</sup> In exchange for such debasement, and for his ritual humiliations at the hands of the Communists, he was decorated by the Rákosi regime on his seventieth birthday,<sup>58</sup> and received the ceremonial title of Member of the Presidential Council. The difference from Hóman’s final days, in prison and in disgrace, could not have been more pronounced. One would be tempted to shrug off the significance of such details, putting them down as the quirks of a confused and confusing era, were it not for one thing: Szekfű made his own luck, and not always by dint of his legendary homage to authority. He owed his political longevity to coping strategies in periods of adversity, and to a number of improvised, but bold and timely, decisions in the course of the war.

Unlike Hóman, who served as Minister of Culture for a whole decade until 1942 — and, more fatally for him, held on to his seat in Parliament when the Arrow Cross came to power on 15 October 1944 — Szekfű jealously guarded his intellectual freedom and independence, demonstratively distancing himself from successive administrations. Also unlike his colleague, he ventured to speak out against the country’s German leanings.

<sup>52</sup> OSZK manuscript collection, miscellaneous correspondence by Gy. Szekfű. Gy. Szekfű to I. Haynal, Moscow, 24 March 1946.

<sup>53</sup> Újváry, ‘A végtelenben újra találkoznak’, p. 44.

<sup>54</sup> Szekfű died on 29 June 1955, outliving Hóman by four years.

<sup>55</sup> Dénes, *Szekfű Gyula*, p. 146.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>58</sup> MOL, M-KS 276 f. 54 cs. 241 ő. e., minutes of the Hungarian Workers’ Party Secretariat, Budapest, 29 April 1953.

That he was ready to write for the social democrat newspaper *Népszava*, the organ of a 'branch of Marxism'<sup>59</sup> he openly despised, was a huge boost to the anti-fascist opposition. A series of his articles in the *Magyar Nemzet* (1943–44), subsequently published as a booklet with the poignant title *Valahol utat tévesztettünk* (*We Lost Our Way Somewhere*, 1987), was praised even by Communists such as József Révai, who described the historian as an 'honest convert'.<sup>60</sup> From late 1944, during the 102-day Soviet siege of Budapest, Szekfű was sheltered in friends' houses and in monasteries. His home was looted by Arrow Cross men. But when he emerged from hiding, he was immediately offered both academic and political situations. Szekfű was one of a select group of intellectuals who were courted by the Communists. As early as 1945, he was spotted in the antechamber to Rákosi's office.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, he was allowed to enter and to travel around the Soviet Union in order to observe and report on the ravages of war.<sup>62</sup> On his return, his public tribute to the immense power of the 'colossus of the north'<sup>63</sup> foreshadowed his change of heart. Whilst he saw the spread of a labyrinthine empire towards the Hungarian frontiers as being an utterly terrifying prospect — one that had duly daunted prominent Hungarians before him, from Kossuth to Count Gyula Andrássy — he proposed adapting to the new geopolitical circumstances by active foreign policy, rather than by resignation, neutrality or a fruitless search for a non-existent 'third way'.<sup>64</sup>

Thus, it was no coincidence that the professor was one of only eight non-party intellectuals, including such distinguished non-political figures as the composer Béla Bartók, to be invited onto the Provisional National Assembly in March 1945.<sup>65</sup> Nonetheless, the perplexing question still remains as to why an establishment historian of the Horthy regime was assigned the monumental task of securing Stalin's leniency towards Hungary. One obvious explanation is the unappealing nature of the task itself. Szekfű's diplomatic mission was a hopeless undertaking, which may

<sup>59</sup> Gyurgyák, 'Szekfű Gyula nemzetszemlélete', p. 306.

<sup>60</sup> Szőke, 'Megjegyzések', p. 488.

<sup>61</sup> Gy. Íllyés, *Naplójegyzetek 1929–1945*, Budapest, 1986, p. 365.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 490.

<sup>63</sup> Szekfű, 'A moszkvai út', pp. 1–2; Hatos, 'Az öreg Szekfű Gyula', p. 56.

<sup>64</sup> This was a pointed message to writers, such as László Németh, and intellectuals around the Peasant Party, who were pursuing the aim of neutrality and looking for a mixed political system, a halfway house between capitalism and Communism.

<sup>65</sup> Budapest, Archives of the Institute of Political History, 274 F. 7–24 ő. e. f. 34, note by E. Gerő to M. Rákosi on the election of the Provisional National Assembly, 22 March 1945; see also J. Horváth et al. (eds), *Pártközi értekezletek 1944–1948*, Budapest, 2003, pp. 27–28.

go some way to explaining why the Hungarian Communists were happy to countenance the appointment of their erstwhile critic to this prime diplomatic post. Yet such an interpretation belies how quickly the Soviets and their Hungarian clients came to regard Szekfű as a key ally. With his considerable international stature, he lent some much-needed weight and legitimacy to the fresh direction of the country's foreign policy. Crucially, it was Marshal Voroshilov, the Head of the Allied Control Commission in Budapest, who advised the Hungarian government to choose a 'non-Communist, non-Jewish professional, someone of the calibre of Gyula Szekfű' for the post.<sup>66</sup> Although the invitation was issued to the historian in the name of all four coalition parties, and was accepted in the same non-partisan spirit,<sup>67</sup> Szekfű surely had no illusions about the role of the Hungarian Communists and his Soviet hosts in the selection process. Hence, the assertion by an American scholar that 'Gyula Szekfű was living evidence that at any rate in the first two years of the "new" Hungary the Smallholders controlled not only the foreign ministry but the foreign service as well'<sup>68</sup> appears to be very wide of the mark. In Moscow Szekfű tried to stay aloof from domestic politics and the infighting of the coalition, but within the Hungarian diplomatic corps he was one of the most vocal detractors of the Smallholders' foreign affairs agenda. It is fair to say, however, that his appointment was agreeable to all the coalition parties, as 'he had such a protean character that a selective résumé could credibly present him as a progressive'.<sup>69</sup>

In a letter to Rákosi in August 1948, the historian, who was not prone to self-promotion, robustly declared that some three years earlier he had been 'the only remotely plausible candidate'.<sup>70</sup> Whilst his open advocacy of a pro-Soviet orientation as the sole viable foreign policy option repelled many of his one-time admirers at home and abroad, it was a boon to the Hungarian Communists and their external sponsors. This is by no means to suggest that Hungarian Muscovites had absolute confidence in the new Minister. As their chief theorist, Révai, put it in the party's daily newspaper, *Szabad Nép*: 'Gyula Szekfű is an ideologue and a historian, and

<sup>66</sup> Ständeisky, "Morális nyugtalanság és féltő gond", p. 98.

<sup>67</sup> MOL, XIX-J-1-u, box 75, Szekfű papers, memorandum by Gy. Szekfű, Moscow, 1 July 1946.

<sup>68</sup> E. Roman, *Hungary and the Victor Powers, 1945-1950*, Basingstoke and London, 1996, p. 282.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> MOL, XIX-J-1-u, box 75, Szekfű papers, Gy. Szekfű to M. Rákosi, Moscow, 16 August 1948.

he is not close to us. For all his transformation he is not a full-blooded democrat; even in his criticism he is a conservative [...]. [Yet] there is such moral and intellectual courage that commands one's respect.<sup>71</sup>

Both as Minister and as Ambassador, Szekfű was surrounded by a stifling atmosphere of mistrust in Moscow. His Hungarian Communist colleagues not only spied on him, but also mocked him, ostracized him and placed endless bureaucratic obstacles in his way, for example, 'forgetting' to arrange transport for him and his wife, or booking four engagements for him within one hour at scattered locations in the sprawling Soviet capital. They sought to compromise him in the eyes of the Soviets, too. Once, they even organized a strike, in a bid to force the Hungarian Foreign Ministry to recall the Head of the Legation. The historian recorded with dismay: 'I have been set up as easy prey for a morally bankrupt and highly ambitious little group, which was presented to me under false pretences, as reliable and fully deserving of my trust.'<sup>72</sup>

Nevertheless, his enemies underestimated the amateur envoy. He had a lot of leverage where it mattered, in Hungary and the Soviet Union alike. His superiors in the Foreign Ministry could hardly ignore Szekfű's dissatisfaction with the lamentable performance by the Hungarian diplomatic corps, as it reflected the view from Moscow:

I do not wish to accuse anyone, only to express my grave concerns. Is there any possible justification for such a poor diplomatic debut for our new democracy at this vital post in Moscow? Is it necessary for our reputation to be tarnished by unscrupulous people, who have sworn an oath to and are being paid by our state? [...] Is there any need for this Legation or its Head, whose activities have been paralysed from the outset? Can Hungary really afford this? This current Hungarian state in particular [...]? In Moscow of all places [...]?<sup>73</sup>

To reinforce his damning verdict, the indignant Minister made a personal plea (and a thinly veiled threat to air his grievances in the press):

For three months, there has been a campaign against me with the full knowledge of high-ranking officials in Budapest [...]. Assuredly, without some political backing, my subordinates would not have dared to play their

<sup>71</sup> Hatos, 'Az öreg Szekfű Gyula', p. 51.

<sup>72</sup> MOL, XIX-J-1-u, box 75, Szekfű papers, memorandum by Gy. Szekfű about the dismissal of Legation personnel, Moscow, 1 July 1946.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.



double game; they could not have reckoned on my recall. Do I deserve this? If I were not a loyal servant of the state, I would be sorely tempted to ask the Hungarian public [...].<sup>74</sup>

Szekfű effected a total change of personnel in July 1946; even so, he continued to complain until the end of his stay of a shortage of dependable and professional staff, notably Russian speakers. As his own command of Russian was limited, the Minister often fell back on his fluent French and German in diplomatic communications. However, in his dealings with the Soviet authorities, he sometimes had to rely on his staff. This proved difficult as his newly appointed colleagues were no more experienced, highly trained, hard-working or politically independent than their dismissed or demoted predecessors. Szekfű was obliged to waste much energy in managing his hostile, unruly subordinates. True to his schooling in the Viennese bureaucracy, and from a deeply ingrained respect for order, he maintained a strict office discipline. He was horrified by the loose morals and the drinking habits of his juniors, which he handled in the manner of an exasperated schoolmaster. Most importantly, despite the mayhem and personal intrigue in the Legation, which had not escaped the attention of his foreign colleagues, he maintained his international standing.

In June 1947, Rákosi, in his capacity as Secretary of the Hungarian Communist Party, went so far as to put the professor forward as Foreign Minister in a letter to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. According to István Vida, this recommendation was not given serious consideration either in Budapest or in Moscow. It is also known that Szekfű was not interested.<sup>75</sup> All the same, Rákosi's argument is telling: the possible appointment of the professor was calculated to prevent British and American censure of the new Hungarian government.<sup>76</sup>

Following the enforced resignation of Zoltán Tildy on 31 July 1948, Szekfű was even offered the elevated, but essentially ceremonial, job of the Presidency of Hungary. By that stage, the Hungarian Communists were eager to remove him from Moscow and to replace him with one of their own. Szekfű again wisely resisted, uttering the enigmatic remark: 'Here at least I am dealing with honest people.'<sup>77</sup> It can be inferred that he was

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> L. Gogolák, 'Aki nem akar külügyminiszter lenni', *Haladás*, 3, 1947, 25, p. 6.

<sup>76</sup> Letter by M. Rákosi to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Budapest, 12 June 1947, in I. Vida (ed.), *Iratok a magyar-szovjet kapcsolatok történetéhez, 1944. október–1948. június*, Budapest, 2005, pp. 273–78 (pp. 276–77).

<sup>77</sup> V. Erős, 'Szekfű – Árnyak és viták', *Kommentár*, 2, 2008, 2, pp. 120–27 (p. 124).

alluding to his friends and contacts amongst foreign, presumably Western, diplomats, which renders his jibe particularly provocative. It is possible that, by 1948, he felt safer in Moscow than in Budapest. Be that as it may, the Hungarian Communists spared him, even after his recall from the Soviet Union. In the words of a friend: 'It was the personality of Szekfű that was seen as a prized asset by the Communists [...]. He represented the thinking of an entire generation. His public volte-face, the denial of his own past, made him an especially valuable ally for the regime.'<sup>78</sup>

Undoubtedly, the propaganda value of turning a conservative historian into an advocate of the Soviet Union was significant in 1945, and it still had some purchase beyond 1948. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the Soviet interest in Szekfű predated the 'liberation' of Hungary. After all, this conservative scholar was one of the few illustrious individuals of the interwar political elite in Budapest to be accurately identified by both British and Soviet wartime intelligence as responsible 'anti-Nazi professionals'.<sup>79</sup> There is some evidence that the two sides were keen to secure his services. His choice between East and West was made sometime in 1944, and it may have been profoundly influenced by his unsuccessful endeavours to leave Hungary for Britain.

### III

The records of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) indicate that Szekfű maintained regular contact with the British secret service,<sup>80</sup> and his name occurs frequently in the SOE papers in the National Archives at Kew. The fact that, as early as 1943, Szekfű wished to move to Britain at the invitation of the British historian C. A. Macartney, a great champion of his work,<sup>81</sup> is often mentioned in Hungarian sources. It is well known, too, that he intended to get away from Hungary, partly to protect his Jewish wife, and partly in the hope of a promised position in Oxford. He planned to travel via Istanbul, on the pretext of having been invited by the Hungarian community there, but the Hungarian Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs refused his request for a visa. In current studies, the refusal is interpreted

<sup>78</sup> Újváry, 'A végtelenben újra találkozunk', p. 75.

<sup>79</sup> Kew, The National Archives (hereafter, TNA), SOE papers, HS4/91, memorandum by SOE Cairo, 8 January 1944.

<sup>80</sup> Szekfű's main point of contact was an SOE agent of Hungarian origin, named György Porthoczky, who sent regular reports from Budapest of all government, military and police activities.

<sup>81</sup> A good example of C. A. Macartney's high regard for Szekfű's scholarship is his glowing review of the latter's French publication, *État et nation*, 1945, in the *English Historical Review*, 62, 1947, 243, pp. 264–65.

as an unmistakable sign of the growing German pressure to curb British-Hungarian communications in Turkey.<sup>82</sup> However, the extent and nature of the British interest in cultivating Szekfű is wholly missing from the Hungarian historical literature.

Unlike in Hungary, where Szekfű was typically regarded as an observer, an influential but lonely figure, in Britain he was viewed as an opposition leader. Intelligence analysts in London and Cairo saw him as the spokesman 'of a sort of left-liberal opposition, comprising a loose block of University Professors, [...] Social Democrat leaders, Agrarian leaders and probably a few Jews.'<sup>83</sup> It was acknowledged that this was an 'extremely amorphous group' that did not 'think in terms of action', nor was it 'willing to do anything which might occasion a German occupation'.<sup>84</sup> For all that, such academic contacts were initially deemed to be infinitely preferable to Horthy's official envoys. Thus, in February 1944, SOE Field Commander Harris Burland instructed Captain Hugh Seton-Watson, an intelligence officer who later came to prominence as a historian of Russia and Eastern Europe, to attempt once more the 'exfiltration' of Szekfű from Hungary to Turkey, on the pretence of inviting him to give a lecture at the university in Istanbul.<sup>85</sup> The plan seemed innocuous. By 1943, there were three Hungarian professors in Turkey working for various Western intelligence agencies, apparently with the full knowledge of both the Germans and the Soviets.<sup>86</sup> One of them, the Nobel laureate in medicine Albert Szent-Györgyi, even succeeded in impressing SOE as a potential prime minister of liberated Hungary. His appearance in Turkey in February 1943 was considered by British intelligence to be a stunning achievement, for which SOE had striven for eighteen months.<sup>87</sup> A British agent telegraphed wishfully: 'we are now in touch with [an] anti-German movement powerful enough to conceive a coup d'état.'<sup>88</sup>

Clearly, SOE was interested in Hungarian scholars who represented what was 'best in Hungary', and Szekfű was at the top of the list.<sup>89</sup> It is worth quoting here at some length from an intelligence document, which

<sup>82</sup> A. Joó, 'Világháborús intrikák: A magyar béketapogatózások és az isztanbuli szintér fontos mozzanatai, 1942–1944', *Századok*, 6, 2008, pp. 1421–64 (p. 1434).

<sup>83</sup> TNA, HS4/91, Captain Uren to Lieutenant Colonel Perkins, 12 July 1943.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> TNA, HS4/99, D/H 44 (H. Burland) to Force 133 (SOE Cairo) for D/H 72 (H. Seton-Watson), Istanbul, 4 February 1944.

<sup>86</sup> A. Joó, 'Világháborús intrikák', p. 1432.

<sup>87</sup> TNA, HS4/109, MFB to DHV, cipher telegram from SOE Cairo, 14 February 1943.

<sup>88</sup> TNA, HS4/109, unsigned cipher telegram from SOE Cairo, 16 February 1943.

<sup>89</sup> TNA, HS4/109, MFB to DHV, cipher telegram from SOE Cairo, 14 February 1943.

explains the British ambivalence towards Horthy's circle and the search for an opposition group:

So long as there is a danger that the German Army would occupy Hungary to prevent acts of major sabotage, it is certain that the present government and régime will do nothing substantial for the Allied cause. Co-operation with the Hungarian government and régime must therefore be primarily a political issue, and as such it is outside the scope of S.O.E. work. It may be politically desirable to maintain the present régime in power as a 'bastion' against the Soviets (though its efficacy in this respect is open to grave doubt); but this is no part of S.O.E. activity. If we want to obtain major acts of sabotage in Hungary, we must seek friends and allies outside the influence of the government and régime. Such friends and allies, potentially, exist. They include, in the first place, the non-régime aristocracy (i.e. those who were never in agreement with Horthy, and who accepted him because they could find no better alternative); next, the anti-German middle-class (excluding the Jews, whose position is a special one, and ranging from the liberal writers of the *Magyar Nemzet* to great intellectual figures such as Professor Szekfű and Dr. Szentgyörgyi [*sic*]); and thirdly, and most important, the semi-organised workers and peasants. A paradox of history has brought these widely-differing elements into some semblance of accord; in particular, there are abundant proofs that leading intellectuals (whose standing in Hungary is high) are ready to lead and inspire a political union between worker and peasant organisations that would throw its weight into the scale on the side of the Allies.<sup>90</sup>

In the memoirs of Aladár Szegedy-Maszák, a former Hungarian diplomat and family friend, Szekfű is said to have declined the offer of SOE's services in escaping from Hungary, owing to his bitter realization that Britain was willing to provoke the German occupation of his country.<sup>91</sup> Yet it is plain from SOE records that he was esteemed in Britain throughout the war, even once he had lost touch with the British secret service in the latter half of 1944. Furthermore, it can be documented that Szekfű approached SOE in the beginning, and not vice versa. It is beyond question, too, that he passed on information to the British, and that he was in frequent communication with British spies, both directly and through his Foreign Ministry and press contacts.<sup>92</sup> According to a memorandum

<sup>90</sup> TNA, HS4/91, SOE Cairo to the Directorate of Special Operations (DSO), 13 April 1943.

<sup>91</sup> A. Szegedy-Maszák, *Az ember ősszel visszanéz: Egy volt magyar diplomata emlékirataiból*, 2 vols, Budapest, 1996, 2, pp. 229–30.

<sup>92</sup> TNA, HS4/98, information and progress report by A/H 6 (Gy. Pálóczi-Horváth),

produced by the Hungarian section (internally known as the ‘Hunk section’) of SOE in the Middle East, Szekfű was regarded as a safe channel by which to access several key Hungarian government officials. What function, if any, the British had in mind for him, either as a leader in exile or in a post-war government, remains unclear. His SOE personnel files in the National Archives are closed until 2031. That said, considering the tragic fate that befell most British agents in the countries occupied by the Red Army, Szekfű’s acceptance by the Soviets after 1945 is something of an enigma.

The operative supposedly ‘instrumental in getting Professor Szekfű invited to Turkey by the Rector of Istanbul University’<sup>93</sup> was SOE’s Hungarian specialist in Istanbul, code-named A/H 6 and identified in the literature as the Communist sympathizer György (‘Bobby’) Pálóczi-Horváth. The same agent, also code-named Howard, regularly reported to the Soviet Embassy on all British liaisons with Hungary.<sup>94</sup> It is plausible, even quite likely, that the Hungarian professor severed his ties with SOE due to his mistrust of the individuals concerned and the suspected Soviet connection. Having received a number of Hungarian complaints, SOE London ordered the Istanbul office to cease using the services of Pálóczi-Horváth, and urged it to ‘focus on liberal elements like Professor Gyula Szekfű and General Rudolf Andorka’.<sup>95</sup> What Szekfű, the supreme critic of Hungarian liberalism, would have thought of being labelled as a ‘liberal element’, one can only guess. A world apart from British liberals, he may have sincerely doubted that the British political system could ever be replicated in Central Europe.<sup>96</sup> Even so, by 1943, sure of both Allied victory and the collapse of the Hungarian regime, he made no secret of his Anglophile sentiments. It is therefore virtually inconceivable that the Soviets would have been ignorant of his links with British intelligence. At the very least, the story of his involvement with SOE adds another dimension to the complex puzzle of the professor’s political survival and unexpected, late diplomatic career.

Istanbul, 12 May 1944.

<sup>93</sup> TNA, HS4/91, B4 (SOE Cairo) to DSO(B), 12 April 1943.

<sup>94</sup> L. Veress, *Clear the Line*, Cleveland, OH, 1995, p. 96.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>96</sup> G. Újváry, ‘Kis magyar história nagy-magyar történeztől – Szekfű Gyula és a *Magyar Történet* rövid összefoglalásának kontextusa’, in G. Újváry (ed.), *A negyedik nemzedék és ami utána következik: Szekfű Gyula és a magyar történetírás a 20. század első felében*, Budapest, 2011, pp. 251–88 (p. 256).

Unlike the tragic heroes of his two biographies, Kossuth and Ferenc Rákóczi, Szekfű opted — after some hesitation — not to pursue his political aims and ambitions in exile. Ironically, a few years on, having fled the murky realm of wartime intelligence, he found himself in a foreign capital acting as a pawn in a no less risky diplomatic game. To his credit, he played the ill-fitting part dutifully and professionally. To what extent his choice between East and West hinged on coincidence, personal factors or political preference is well-nigh impossible to judge retrospectively. The pragmatism of his decisions, however, is beyond doubt. His attachment to Britain in the early 1940s is testimony not only to his British sympathies, but also to his unsentimental assessment of Hungary's military and political conduct during the war. His work with SOE proves that Szekfű lacked neither courage nor conviction. His daring, however, was tempered by strong survival instincts and by political realism. What follows here is a brief account of Szekfű's role in Moscow, based on his memoranda rather than his much-perused journalistic or scholarly output. These diplomatic documents, hitherto unknown to the English-speaking reader, provide a few helpful glimpses into the historian's post-war legacy, one that is apt to arouse fierce political controversy in Hungary.

#### IV

Szekfű was appointed as Head of the Hungarian Legation in Moscow on 15 October 1945, on the first anniversary of Horthy's bungled attempt to abandon the Axis and join the Allies. The timing of the appointment was inauspicious. The government of Ferenc Szálasi had left Hungary with the stigma of being 'Hitler's last satellite', the painful memory of which was still fresh in the minds of all Hungarian representatives. In effect, the task of selling the country's new democratic image abroad was futile, and yet it was a vital aspect of Hungarian preparations for the peace conference. No diplomatic mission was more shackled than the one in Moscow. The Soviets treated Hungary as a defeated country deserving of extreme punitive measures, including outright marginalization and the lowest prioritization. As Ivan Maiskii, a Soviet deputy foreign minister, had bluntly put it in January 1944:

The Soviet Union is not interested in building up a strong Hungary [...]. The Allies have not forgotten her wartime conduct [...]. The Hungarian state must be maintained, but preferably on a reduced scale, making use of the ethnic principle. If there is any uncertainty in the implementation of

this principle, all disputes must be settled to the detriment of Hungary [...]. For the first few years after the war Hungary must be kept in international isolation.<sup>97</sup>

The words of this senior Soviet diplomat and politician were quickly borne out by the facts after 1945. It could be held that the resolution to show leniency towards Romania, at the expense of Hungary, was not a reward for successfully changing sides in the war, but the product of strategic considerations instead. In any event, Hungarian diplomats faced an uphill battle in presenting their case for frontier revision, territorial autonomy and minority protection to the victors. In August 1945, Soviet diplomats had warned against the mere mention of the 'injustice of Trianon', advising 'modest behaviour' as a penance for failing to desert Germany.<sup>98</sup> Although bilateral relations gradually normalized in 1946, the Soviets turned frosty whenever Hungarian territorial issues were broached. Hungary and its foreign service remained in near-total diplomatic isolation in the aftermath of the war, just as Maiskii had intended.

Szekfű left for Moscow only in March 1946. He had been delayed in his departure by the treatment of a heart condition as much as by the prevailing political conditions, which had thrown up bureaucratic problems with his accreditation that prevented him from travelling at the outset. Then, in January 1946, he had suffered a massive heart attack following his commemorative lecture on Lenin in the Hungarian Opera House. Without question, the obligation to give such a lecture was hugely unedifying and discomfiting for the arch-conservative history professor. In subsequent years, the delivery of laudatory anniversary speeches became a routine exercise for leading historians of the Communist era, but at the time it required steely nerves and great diplomatic tact from Szekfű as one of the most prominent former enemies of the left:

Here is another proof of the old historical paradox that one can observe and appraise the past only from a certain perspective; standing at the foot of a tower we cannot judge its proportions. In the matter of the sweeping changes in Russia, that perspective was provided by the Second World War.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>97</sup> A. Domány, "A Szovjetunióknak nem érdeke egy erős Magyarország": Titkos szovjet dokumentumok az erdélyi kérdésről', *Mozgó Világ*, 26, 2000, 8, p. 13.

<sup>98</sup> MOL, XIX-J-1-j, box 57, memorandum by I. Kertész, Budapest, 10 August 1945.

<sup>99</sup> Dénes, *Szekfű Gyula*, p. 136.



Whether the deterioration in his health was the result of his performance, the professor's encomium to Lenin caused lasting damage to his scholarly reputation. With his undoubted skill and customary panache, Szekfű juggled with the facts until they fitted the desired flattering image: Lenin as the 'grandmaster in the art of politics'.<sup>100</sup> Arguably, though, shortly before taking office in Moscow, Szekfű was not so troubled by the degrading duty of speaking in praise of Lenin as by the daunting diplomatic task ahead. He faced the prospect of assuming an unfamiliar professional role, one that promised to have a profound influence on the future of Hungary. He was under no illusion about the difficulty of his chosen part, or about the political restraints on him:

Realistically, in the morrow of the lost war [...] Hungarian foreign policy can no longer be independent or adopt the usual norms of interaction between equal and less equal sovereign states. The armistice agreement, the occupation, the fate of Hungarian prisoners of war and last but not least the peace treaty make an independent foreign policy implausible. First of all we have to pay heed to the views of the Soviets. Those who think the opposite (and there are many of them in this country) fail to comprehend our position.<sup>101</sup>

Forever the voice of realism, Szekfű was exasperated by the 'patriotic moaning and groaning'<sup>102</sup> habitual to his countrymen. As he had recounted to his publisher after the First World War: 'There is one thing that people at home always tend to forget: we are a defeated nation and to us the peace is *dictated*'.<sup>103</sup> More than a quarter of a century later, he was just as incensed when struggling to persuade his compatriots of the vanity of their revisionist dreams and territorial demands. Not that he accepted the Trianon frontiers as final. As the editor of 135 bulky volumes of the *Magyar Szemle* from 1927 to 1938, he had worked tirelessly for revision as the ultimate goal of Hungarian foreign policy; notwithstanding, he was convinced that it was a long-term ambition, which was achievable only by the exemplary treatment of Hungary's minorities and the settlement of disputes with neighbouring states. By 1945, he no longer believed in the practicability

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> MOL, XIX-J-42-a, box 8, annual report by Gy. Szekfű on the activities of the Legation in 1946, Moscow, 23 February 1947; Lázár, *Szekfű Gyula követ*, p. 147.

<sup>102</sup> OSZK manuscript collection, miscellaneous correspondence with the publisher Manó Dick, Gy. Szekfű to M. Dick, Vienna, 25 January 1920.

<sup>103</sup> OSZK manuscript collection, Gy. Szekfű to M. Dick, Vienna, 14 December 1919.

of territorial revision either at the peace conference or in the foreseeable future.<sup>104</sup> He positively disapproved of the efforts of the Smallholder Prime Minister, Ferenc Nagy, and his Foreign Minister, János Gyöngyösi, to enlist British and American help in the territorial disagreements with Hungary's neighbours. When, in June 1946, government delegations were sent to Washington, London and Paris, these precipitated an immediate cooling in Soviet-Hungarian relations, and the envoy in Moscow was prompt in sounding the alarm.<sup>105</sup>

He was critical of the hopes of Western support entertained by government officials at the peace conference and thereafter. The Minister's message to Budapest was terse and unequivocal: 'As far as I know, any revision of our peace settlement depends on Soviet Russia.'<sup>106</sup> Accordingly, he saw no grounds for pursuing a foreign policy of Western orientation: 'Hungarian reluctance to be part of the Soviet zone stretching from Finland to Bulgaria [...] and secret (or not so secret) hopes of Anglo-Saxon intervention or another such miracle [...] only serve to hinder an improvement in Soviet-Hungarian relations [...] and once again engender in the Soviets a mistrust towards us.'<sup>107</sup>

Whether such arguments are now taken as expressions of realism, or as evidence of the Hungarian envoy's acquiescence, subservience and cynicism, is a matter of interpretation. As a historian, Szekfű never tried to hide his admiration for champions of unpopular strategic compromise, who knowingly put their reputations on the line for pragmatic reasons and long-term benefit. In any case, when it comes to the peace treaty, current works are rightly dismissive both of Szekfű's role in the Moscow negotiations in April 1946 and of his impact on the Hungarian peace preparations. As László Borhi spells out:

The Hungarians had little insight into Kremlin politics. They had no experienced negotiator [...]. Moreover they lacked sound advice on the nature of Soviet foreign policy. Gyula Szekfű, the Hungarian minister in Moscow, was an outstanding historian of great intellectual influence,

<sup>104</sup> I. Bertényi Jr, 'Szekfű Gyula', in I. Romsics (ed.), *Trianon és a magyar politikai gondolkodás 1920–1953*, Budapest, 1998, pp. 51–69 (p. 65).

<sup>105</sup> L. Borhi, *Megalkuvás és erőszak: Az Egyesült Államok és a szovjet térhódítás Magyarországon, 1944–49*, Debrecen, 1997, p. 113.

<sup>106</sup> MOL, XIX-J-42-a, box 8, memorandum by Gy. Szekfű based on his discussions with Vladimir Dekanozov, a Soviet deputy foreign minister, about the deportation of Hungarians from Slovakia, Moscow, 16 February 1947; Lázár, *Szekfű Gyula követ*, p. 141.

<sup>107</sup> MOL, XIX-J-42-a, box 8, annual report by Gy. Szekfű, Moscow, 23 February 1947; Lázár, *Szekfű Gyula követ*, p. 145.

but nevertheless had little expertise in Soviet affairs and had no access to Soviet leaders.<sup>108</sup>

The charge that Szekfű's fatalism only strengthened the hand of those who advocated a 'Realpolitik that led toward the Kremlin'<sup>109</sup> is fully justified, even if it feels somewhat severe. It is certainly hard to imagine any Hungarian expert on the Soviet Union, no matter how well versed in the intricacies of Kremlin politics, faring much better in gaining concessions. True, as Ignác Romsics has demonstrated, Szekfű was misguided in his anticipation of Soviet magnanimity, and most of his attempts to flatter the Soviets were utterly wasted.<sup>110</sup> At the same time, one might also ask what other, more advantageous course was available to Hungarian diplomats in Moscow. As Standeisky cautiously states in the historian's defence: 'Szekfű caused no harm to Hungary in Moscow, only to his own standing.'<sup>111</sup> But whether his mission yielded any tangible beneficial outcomes is still a moot point, which needs to be addressed here.

Szekfű himself was painfully aware of the restrictions imposed upon him, and of the obstacles to representing Hungarian national interests in the Soviet Union. Yet, all along, he worked on the assumption that Hungary's situation was more likely to get worse than better, and in this he was not mistaken. He endeavoured to use whatever credit he had garnered through his advocacy of Soviet orientation in Hungarian foreign policy, so as to secure relatively minor, but important, gestures of goodwill, such as the release of prisoners of war; the repatriation of detained, sick, displaced or stateless Hungarians; and the reunification of families.

In addition, he fought to reduce the Soviet demands for reparations, but without enormous conviction. Although the Hungarian delegation in Moscow negotiated for reparations to be spread over eight years rather than six, the respite so granted did not afford Hungary much relief.<sup>112</sup> Szekfű's record was not particularly impressive when it came to financial bargaining. Molotov proved to be 'immovable and rigid'<sup>113</sup> whenever he was approached about any delay or reduction in the payment of reparations. However, as Borhi has amply documented, demands for

<sup>108</sup> L. Borhi, *Hungary in the Cold War, 1945–1956*, Budapest and New York, 2004, p. 89.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> I. Romsics, *Az 1947-es párizsi békeszerződés*, Budapest, 2006, p. 227.

<sup>111</sup> Standeisky, "Morális nyugtalanság és féltő gond", p. 98.

<sup>112</sup> Lázár, *Szekfű Gyula követ*, p. 43.

<sup>113</sup> MOL, XIX-J-1-j, box 5, memorandum by J. Gyöngyösi about his negotiations with Molotov in the presence of Szekfű, Paris, 27 September 1946.

reparations and various methods of economic exploitation played a central part in the planning for the Soviet domination of Hungary.<sup>114</sup> It could be argued that Szekfű's inability to achieve a notable financial concession is no reflection on his efficiency or dexterity as a diplomat. In any event, the Minister was far more successful in humanitarian matters.

In the face of official hostility and bureaucratic intransigence in Moscow, the professor toiled indefatigably to trace captive or displaced civilians (especially women and children), survivors of labour battalions and a vast, but unknown, number of prisoners of war. The Hungarian Foreign Ministry crudely estimated that there was a minimum of 250,000, and a maximum of 500,000, Hungarian soldiers in Soviet captivity,<sup>115</sup> but there were no exact statistics, a fact that was used by the Soviets to defer any mass release. Likewise, full and accurate lists of all missing Hungarian civilians in the Soviet Union were required to be produced, a request with which it was impossible to comply. Even so, the Minister managed to compile various lists, one identifying some 11,000 civilian detainees, and he refused to be taken in by the repeated contention that the missing people had perished in German captivity.<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, he challenged the cynical claim by a Soviet deputy foreign minister, Vladimir Dekanozov, that most of the detainees had German names. In his memoranda, Szekfű may have blamed the 'administrative inefficiency of a colossal empire'<sup>117</sup> for his difficulties in locating and freeing Hungarians, but he showed the utmost persistence, determination and firmness in his handling of the relevant Soviet authorities. The return of the released prisoners, both military and civilian, posed a myriad of logistical problems and considerable expense for the Hungarian Legation. Thanks to the Minister's perseverance, the sum of 1,200 roubles needed for the transport of every soldier was eventually obtained. By 1947, the Legation had assisted the homecoming of approximately 37,000 prisoners of war and thousands of detainees.

<sup>114</sup> L. Borhi, *A vasfüggöny mögött, Magyarország nagyhatalmi erőtérben 1945–1968*, Budapest, 2000, pp. 5–7; L. Borhi, 'The Merchants of the Kremlin: The Economic Roots of Soviet Expansion in Hungary', Cold War International History Project, working paper no. 28, Washington, 2000.

<sup>115</sup> MOL, XIX-J-1-j, box 66/B, memorandum by General Pokorny about the fate of prisoners of war, Budapest, 1 April 1947.

<sup>116</sup> MOL, XIX-J-1-j, box 66/B, memorandum by I. Horváth about a discussion between Szekfű and Vlasov on the subject of missing Hungarian civilians, Moscow, 14 April 1946.

<sup>117</sup> MOL, XIX-J-1-j, box 66/B, memorandum by Gy. Szekfű, Moscow, 20 March 1947.

Even though Szekfű sought to dampen public expectations of a swift conclusion to the ongoing negotiations, he recorded with evident satisfaction and pride that his toils had been more fruitful than those of the Romanian, Polish and Austrian representatives. A testament to Szekfű's qualified success was the Communist Ernő Gerő's sudden concern in 1947:

The return of the prisoners of war from Russia is becoming not only a transport problem, but also an issue of domestic affairs, as amongst the returnees there are many undesirables and enemies of our democracy. A vetting procedure must be initiated by the Minister of the Interior.<sup>118</sup>

The documents suggest that Szekfű used his own initiative; he was resourceful and relentless in his pursuit of humanitarian and national aims, as long as he did not have to antagonize his hosts too greatly. This has been duly acknowledged in the sole publication about Szekfű's mission.<sup>119</sup> For all that, his diplomatic role had an important regional dimension, which has been wholly neglected in the literature.

Szekfű's attitude towards Hungary's neighbours provides us with several pointers as to the extent and limits of his changing political outlook. His preoccupation with Czechoslovakia was partly a response to the expulsion of Hungarians from Slovakia, but it had much deeper roots. The importance of this new-old aspect of Hungarian foreign policy is highlighted in a Russian document. As the senior Soviet Foreign Ministry official Andrei Vlasov opined in June 1946:

The recommendation of comrades Sviridov and Pushkin to put pressure on Hungary through Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Romania in order to improve our position in Hungary seems to me worthy of support. Then Hungary will be forced to turn to us for counsel and assistance.<sup>120</sup>

The Soviet plan worked to perfection. In accordance with traditional Hungarian diplomacy, Szekfű tried to represent the interests of his country against those of Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia, and to forestall any Moscow-inspired revival of the Little Entente. In his view, these 'three good friends'<sup>121</sup> of old were once again acting in unison in 1946, so

<sup>118</sup> MOL, XIX-J-1-j, box 66/B, E. Gerő to J. Gyöngyösi, Budapest, 3 March 1947.

<sup>119</sup> Lázár, *Szekfű Gyula követ*, pp. 5–13.

<sup>120</sup> Memorandum by A. P. Vlasov, Moscow, 19 June 1946, in Vida (ed.), *Iratok a magyar-szovjet kapcsolatok történetéhez*, pp. 215–16.

<sup>121</sup> Szekfű, *Rövid Magyar Történet*, p. 510.

completing Hungary's isolation. Moreover, the Minister observed with alarm how the co-operation between these neighbouring states appeared to affect Hungary's position vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. He reported even the slightest shift in the relations of this triad, and anxiously surveyed its transactions with the Soviet Foreign Ministry. He complained bitterly to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry of the relative lack of information that bedevilled his effective defence of Hungary's interests:

The three missions, which are overtly tasked to monitor and attack us, are fully informed about both our domestic and foreign affairs, whilst the Hungarian Minister receives news weeks out of date and is thus forced to follow events fumbling around in the dark.<sup>122</sup>

The same considerations burdened the Minister when instructed from Budapest to appeal to Soviet sympathy about the expulsion of Hungarians from Slovakia and the expropriation of Hungarians in Romania. He impressed upon Gyöngyösi that the Soviets were 'unlikely to abandon the interests of such clients as Czechoslovakia and Romania for the sake of Hungary'.<sup>123</sup>

For all the excesses of his fixation with neighbouring states, Szekfű correctly noted how Soviet complaints about the unreliability and the 'see-saw policies' of the Nagy government were utilized by the former Little Entente states to rebut any possible Hungarian demands at the peace conference.<sup>124</sup> Hence, it seems that Szekfű's deference to the Soviets was, to some degree, reinforced by his realization that his country's total isolation would only end if the Soviets stopped pitting Hungary against her neighbours. At the same time, the Minister strove to counter Czechoslovak influence in Moscow, and he was gleeful at the cooling of relations between the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia prompted by the latter's bid to participate in the Marshall Plan.

The legacy of the historian-turned-diplomat, with regard to Soviet hegemony and national rivalry in Central Europe after the war, strikes one as mixed at best. Yet, in the context of Hungarian foreign policy, his appointment in 1945 was as reasonable as his acceptance of 'Eastern

<sup>122</sup> MOL, XIX-J-42-a, box 8, memorandum by Gy. Szekfű about the lack of political information at the Hungarian Legation, Moscow, 1 August 1946; Lázár, *Szekfű Gyula követ*, p. 102.

<sup>123</sup> MOL, XIX-J-1-j, box 57, Gy. Szekfű to J. Gyöngyösi, Moscow, 27 July 1947.

<sup>124</sup> MOL, XIX-J-42-a, box 8, memorandum by Gy. Szekfű about the Soviet reaction to Hungarian negotiations in Washington, 21 June 1946; Lázár, *Szekfű Gyula követ*, pp. 87–88.

democracy<sup>125</sup> was inevitable. For all his character flaws, he was markedly more perceptive and astute than any of his Communist successors in Moscow.

Szekfű was removed from his ambassadorial post in the autumn of 1948, as part of the rapid Communist restructuring of the Hungarian diplomatic corps. On 11 August, as a pretext to dismiss him, Rákosi called on Szekfű's help in negotiating with the Catholic Church, urging him to return to Budapest soon. In spite of the demonstratively friendly tone of the personal letter, there was no mistaking the Communist leader's intentions.<sup>126</sup> Six weeks later, Rajk, in his capacity as Foreign Minister, officially requested Szekfű's immediate departure from Moscow, seeking to expedite his replacement by another historian, the party stalwart Erik Molnár.<sup>127</sup> Ironically, Rajk, who became the first high-ranking Communist victim of the dictatorship the following year, had taken good care to conceal the political motives behind the personnel changes at the Moscow Embassy. In sharp contrast to several prominent members of the Hungarian foreign service who had fled Hungary in 1947–48, Szekfű heeded Rajk's warning not to suggest that he had fallen foul of the regime. He thereby bought himself personal safety and security in old age. His ultimate capitulation to his long-standing political adversaries may be as hard for future generations to stomach as it was for many of his contemporaries. Nevertheless, this should not take away from Szekfű's achievements as a diplomat, serving his devastated country at a critical time and against all the odds, on the cusp of a new historical epoch.

## V

The designation of Szekfű as Minister, then as Ambassador, is commonly described as being curious or dubious, depending on the writer's point of view. An American historian sees Szekfű as a poor choice of envoy, since he was only 'superficially pro-Soviet'.<sup>128</sup> Conversely, Hungarian historians are reluctant to give Szekfű the benefit of the doubt, arguing that he was, if anything, too pro-Soviet. This verdict is strengthened by the last sorry chapter of his life in the Rákosi era. Overall, one cannot but marvel at the arch-conservative professor's complete transformation and numerous inconsistencies. Even so, the biographical approach widely

<sup>125</sup> Gy. Szekfű, *Forradalom után*, Budapest, 1983, pp. 201–02.

<sup>126</sup> MOL, XIX-J-1-j, box 75, M. Rákosi to Gy. Szekfű, Budapest, 11 August 1948.

<sup>127</sup> MOL, XIX-J-1-j, box 75, L. Rajk to Gy. Szekfű, Budapest, 22 September 1948.

<sup>128</sup> Roman, *Hungary and the Victor Powers*, p. 279.



adopted by historians — despite the absence of a full Szekfű biography either in English or in Hungarian — has failed to identify any coherence or overarching design; the ‘old Szekfű’ still comes across as an unsolved conundrum, a political inconvenience. On closer inspection, however, one finds in his diplomatic papers as much traditionalism as pragmatism, as many truths as falsehoods, as much courage as cowardice, as much wisdom as fallibility. Although not a trained diplomat, he remained a thoughtful scholar and a dutiful, efficient bureaucrat to the end. Szekfű was no Talleyrand; he could not break the isolation of his defeated country, any more than he could present Hungary’s case at the table of the victors. All the same, his humiliating dealings with the Soviets were not entirely futile, being inextricably linked with his immensely patriotic and highly personal mission to survive.