Chapter 14

The Ordeal in Paris

The two distinct voices that Hungarian diplomacy adopted in its balancing act between east and west found expression in the notes János Gyöngyösi addressed to the representatives of the great powers in anticipation of the peace conference. The only common plea was that a commission be formed to investigate and recommend a solution for "the Hungarian question." The notes sent to Arthur Schoenfeld and Alvary Gascoigne went on to say: "In presenting this request, Hungary looks with particular trust to those great powers which have... held a conference on the Crimean peninsula and have undertaken to establish a liberated Europe... In the view of the Hungarian government this can be brought about in the most satisfactory manner if just and genuinely democratic principles, permeated by the Atlantic Charter and the San Francisco basic documents will find employment in international settlements." The note to Georgy Pushkin made no such embarrassing reference. It was humble and self-effacing. "Before the peace conference the much suffering and long misguided Hungarian people looks... with particular trust and hope to the Soviet Union which had never recognized the post–World War I settlements and whose wise statesmen, especially the great Lenin, have condemned the methods by which these peace settlements were constructed. Apart from these considerations, the Hungarian government asks for the special support of the Soviet Union for this reason too: it is the great power particularly interested in the Danubian
basin and has a primary interest in [bringing about] a just settlement in it as well as frank understanding and cooperation among Danubian States."

The argumentation in this letter might have carried some weight a year earlier but had lost its moral force since. Times of war are better suited for the promulgation of noble principles than periods of peacemaking, when hard national interests clash. References to the Atlantic Charter were out of date and the Declaration on Liberated Europe had been reduced to meaninglessness by soviet actions in Poland, Rumania, and elsewhere. As to Leninist principles, they had been overtaken by a new phase in soviet imperialism. The flux in East Europe called for an opportunistic diplomacy of which Stalin was a past master. He had installed in Bucharest a Moscow-friendly government (Petru Groza was a member of the leftist Ploughmen’s Front, which was similar to the Hungarian National Peasant Party) and rewarded its subservience by protecting Rumania from Hungarian claims on Transylvania. Prague was induced to cooperate by soviet support for its Slavic aspirations. Even the Hungarians might reconcile themselves to the bitterly resented territorial status quo if they were in exchange allowed a measure of internal independence. With the Danubian states in line, the entire navigable portion of the river would be under effective soviet control.

But Hungary was once again an exception to this tidy scheme. Its deference to Moscow was entirely verbal. Nearly every speech by a public figure stressed the need for close cooperation with the Soviet Union, but the phrases rang false when the premier was a devout Catholic; the ambassador in Moscow (Gyula Szekfű) was a man who in his long career had served Habsburgs, Horthy, the Nazis, and now, like a latter-day Talleyrand, the Hungarian Republic; and the largest party in the country unmistakably spoke with the voice of reaction.

Hungary was a special case also because while victor states like Poland and Czechoslovakia and meritorious defeated states like Finland and Rumania had all lost land to the Soviet Union, Moscow raised no claim of this nature against Hungary. A quarter century of righteous indignation over Trianon served as a shield against further amputations. Even the Czechoslovaks, in the best position to demand territorial cession, asked for no more than a small bridgehead embracing five villages. They proved all the more stubborn and vindictive though in putting their Slavic national idea into practice. They evinced not the slightest interest in where the Magyars expelled from Slovakia would find a home; the Budapest government, as we have noted, was at a loss. Most of the confiscated Swabian farms had been given to tenant farmers who had not benefited from the land reform. For the Slovak side the fact that most of the Hungarians slated for