Was the territory of Slovakia paid for with coal delivered to Hungary by Czechoslovakia in 1918? That seems to be the slightly bombastic claim in Aliaksandr Piahanau’s article, which has a twofold aim: integrating the history of energy supply and security into the history of the post-World War I peace settlements and to propose a new interpretation of the territorial arrangements between Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Despite excessive territorial claims from all the successor states, the end of the post-World War I armed conflicts in most parts of Central and Eastern Europe in 1919 was less the result of diplomatic efforts to restore peace than the consequence of the absence of resources, mainly the lack of energy. Due to the new political geography of the region, energy acquisition was henceforth only possible through transnational cooperation and trade (87-88). It was the realization of this necessity, and not misguided diplomacy, military weakness, or ethnic tensions that finally created the Trianon boundaries, which deprived Hungary of two-thirds of its territory and 60 percent of its population (94-95.) However, while these claims are clearly interrelated, Piahanau also makes clear that the second one, that Hungary accepted territorial losses in exchange for coal, is the more important point in this article. (100).

To make this argument, Piahanau starts with a brief outline of the energy situation at the wake of the First World War in Central Europe. Coal was not only the main energy source, but it was allocated very unevenly in this geographic space and often far from the main industrial centers of Vienna and Budapest, making its control an important leverage point. Since the end of the war, Czechoslovakia had benefited most from this reality due to its successful acquisition of the coal mines in the Bohemian Lands and Teschen. Czechoslovak politicians did not refrain from using this weapon, first with Austria, where especially Vienna was in dire need of energy, not only for its industry, but also for the freezing and hungry population of the capital. Thus, the Czechoslovak government conditioned coal deliveries on acceptance of territorial alignments (the renouncing of Austrian claims on the German-inhabited areas of the Bohemian Lands) and even later the Czechoslovak government readily interrupted the flow of coal as needed. As Czechoslovakia itself faced shortages during the first month of the postwar period, its leaders could use it as an effective argument for annexing the Teschen mines too, making the country the critical hub in Central Europe: the source of most of the locally

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1 He writes: “This section underlines the connections between Hungarian-Czechoslovakian coal and territorial talks. It argues that in the face of the post-war coal crisis, the main rescue plan for Budapest was to restore the previous intensive trade networks, namely supply chains linking Hungary to the Silesian mines. To achieve this goal, an accord with Czechoslovakia, located between these mines and Hungary, was indispensable. But there was a price. As one key figure in the events of 1918–9 later evoked, each coal wagon from Bohemia was to be paid for with Hungarian territory. This assertion constitutes the chief assumption of this third section and of the entire piece,” 100.
mined coal and the transit crossroads for German coal exports. The allies thus inserted coal provisions in the Treaty of Saint Germain, obliging Czechoslovakia to make coal deliveries to Austria.

Hungary faced a precarious energy situation similar to that of Austria. Its leaders sought a means of securing coal for its population and industrial base from the very first days of its revolution, which brought about the abolition of the monarchy under the leadership of Count Mihály Károlyi. It sent delegates to Prague and set up a Coal Center there, while the Károlyi-government’s missives to President Woodrow Wilson, Georges Clemenceau of France and David Lloyd George of Great Britain between November and February repeatedly called attention to the importance of coal. It argued that its absence would lead to economic collapse and Bolshevism, and that the fragmentation of the former Habsburg monarchy due to customs boundaries therefore had to be preempted and free trade and intense economic relations restored, if possible through some form of a Danubian political cooperation—confederation or federation. These efforts met with sympathy among many of the Allied experts, including the British William Henry Beveridge and the American Alonzo E. Taylor, a high ranking leader of the American Relief Administration, who struggled to grapple with what was happening in Central Europe and whose starting point was the necessity of a similar configuration for strong economic cooperation.

Bargaining with coal and territories was strikingly simultaneous, Piahanau argues. For example, Serbia committed to resuming coal deliveries from the occupied southern Hungarian city of Pécs to Budapest just a day before Colonel Vix, the Entente representative in Budapest, handed over a note to interim President Mihály Károlyi demanding the withdrawal of Hungarian troops from the line they occupied on the border of Transylvania to the Great Plaines, leaving most of Eastern Hungary for Romanian occupation. The Hungarian Soviet Republic, which was declared as the result of resistance to the Vix-note and collapsed on 1 August 1919, faced economic blockade from the Entente despite its efforts to acquire coal, while the restoration of the coal supply was a primary aim of the subsequent counter-revolutionary governments.

But Piahanau argues that Hungary was invested even more into coal diplomacy than these simultaneities suggest. From the very beginning, Hungarians had parallel talks with Czechoslovakia in which the plan of exchanging coal for territory figured prominently. In November 1918 Czechoslovakia refused to recognize Hungarian territorial integrity in exchange for food as the Hungarian government proposed. At the start of December, Hungary accepted a demarcation line to the north that ceded most of Slovakia, while the Czechoslovak representative in Budapest, Milan Hodža, publicly hinted in an interview at the possibility of coal deliveries. From now on, it was the Czechoslovak Republic, which was in possession of most of the territories it wanted, that floated the possibility of a coal for territory agreement already before the signing of the peace treaty but facing Hungarian resistance. The roles were swapped during the Hungarian Soviet Republic, when Béla Kun’s regime made overtures about territorial concessions in exchange for coal deliveries. After its fall the Entente used coal as a leverage to coax Hungary into shedding a radical rightist government in November 1919 for a government of national unity, and eventually to sign the peace treaty.

Finally, coal became an important factor of late peacemaking, with Hungary receiving its peace conditions in January 1920. As opposed to the traditional narrative the French-Hungarian negotiations in the spring of 1920, Piahanau argues, Hungarian politicians did not expect territorial concessions for signing the peace treaty. Instead of territorial concessions, energy security and finally a promise of advantageous coal deliveries

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inserted into the peace treaty were the main reason that Hungarian leaders accepted the treaty, whose terms they otherwise publicly condemned as the death warrant of the country.

The article is certainly laudable for connecting energy issues with the process of peace making in Central Europe. Also important is how it highlights the fact that besides Great Power diplomacy and the efforts of the successor states to influence their decisions, from the first moment of the cessation of hostilities, those states had bilateral relations and they used them to address more than just practical matters. Issues of the peace with a broader salience were on the table at these talks, and the participants often looked for alternatives for the emerging new order. Even though these issues are already part of the historiography to a larger extent than the uninitiated reader might think, they are certainly not at the forefront.3

As for Piahanau’s argument regarding its main claim of Hungary’s acceptance of territorial concessions for coal and tighter economic relations, regardless of the importance of highlighting the bilateral connections, the management of a post-war settlement in Central and Eastern Europe was a multi-level effort in which the transnational was at least as important as the bilateral, often directly affecting the latter. Humanitarian relief, which relied upon an enormous logistical, financial and economic effort, was tightly linked with restoring economic ties, but—even more importantly for Piahanau’s argument—with restoring transportation and production infrastructure and energy security. The respective transnational bodies like the coal commission surveyed capacities in minute detail, paying attention, for instance, to how much steel wire individual mines in Teschen or Silesia needed for running on full capacity, and how many valves the locomotives needed to run uninterrupted.4 The bilateral was one aspect of this larger effort that was just as fraught with tensions and conflicts as the transnational level was, but any account remains one-sided without bringing together the two.

From this larger perspective of reorganization, coal was not the only energy resource, Romanian (and to a lesser extent Galician) oil was just as significant, while diplomacy around it was strikingly similar to that of coal. The food-for-energy scheme was at the core of these efforts, which were also a means of resuscitating trade. Foreign currency that was accumulated from energy export transactions within Central and Eastern Europe was key to importing goods from the West, to reconstructing infrastructure, and to bringing the region’s economy on its feet.5 The bilateral efforts in this regard, which are in the forefront of Piahanau’s account, certainly demonstrate the existing solid economic grounds for transnational efforts rooted in the complementary nature of the regional economies, but the transnational management of this reorganization also shows that the bilateral efforts were not detached from the broader ones, at least not to the extent that the article asserts.

In treating Hungarian diplomacy between November 1918 and June 1920 as something that was uniform—despite the many regime changes it also details, the article also misinterprets the series of Czechoslovak-Hungarian bilateral exchanges. The expectations of these successive regimes regarding the shape of the new European order were very different and this difference influenced how they set their foreign policy goals. Károlyi’s government believed in the Wilsonianism and national self-determination and interpreted the latter as the guarantee of Hungary’s territorial integrity. The Hungarian Republic of Soviets and its leader, Béla


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Kun, envisaged world revolution and a federation of Soviet Republics that would make national distinctions obsolete. Finally, the counterrevolutionary regime not only faced the Romanian occupation of most of the rump country, but was also confronted with the reality of the new borders that were made public this time. After the signing of the Versailles, Saint Germain, and Neuilly treaties, they could not have had any illusions about how much these proposed boundaries would change throughout the negotiations with the Hungarian delegation.

The difference between the policies of the successive governments is clear in Piahanau’s narrative in the form of the changing attitudes of these governments to the idea of a coal for territory agreement. Károlyi, as Piahanau notes, refused these Czechoslovak openings after late 1918, and placed his hopes in the Allies for the restoration of coal deliveries, despite the serious social and economic consequences of not accepting Czechoslovak proposals. Contrarily, Béla Kun was ready to acknowledge the boundaries set out by the peace conference because in his vision they were not significant in the larger matter of the revolution’s success, and because the Republic of Soviets imagined a state like Soviet Russia replacing Hungary. Finally, the counterrevolutionary government did not seek border changes directly from Czechoslovakia, instead linking the economy with territorial concessions to Hungary in their negotiations with France. Since in this case they were bargaining over a matter that was settled, they did not have too much leverage vis-à-vis Czechoslovakia.

The only case in which there seems to be relatively strong proof for Piahanau’s argument is the so-called Hodža-negotiations at the end of November and early December 1918. Milan Hodža, a former MP in the Hungarian parliament who represented the Slovak National Council and by proxy the Czechoslovak government, engaged in talks with the Hungarian government about the status of Slovakia. The sources Piahanau cites, but does not analyze in detail, show a very different picture. The Hungarian government was in fact not ready to give up Upper Hungary to Czechoslovakia. Instead it used these talks to divide Slovak politics from Czech ones. The offer they made to the Slovak National Council was based upon a kind of dualism that involved a Slovak legislative body that would settle common matters with the Hungarian parliament through delegations, and a common Hungarian state framework that retained economic matters—including customs—within the jurisdiction of the Hungarian government. Instead of a territorial concession to Czechoslovakia, they proposed autonomy for Slovaks, and the Hungarian government hoped (maybe even believed) that it would serve as a precedent. A solution that was tempting enough for the other nationalities (even for Romanians whom they saw the most stubborn opponents of similar plans) to accept a similar arrangement within a democratic Hungary whose borders would not change. Furthermore, in this case it was not a bilateral agreement that led to the cession of territories, but an external intervention (at the behest of the Czechoslovak government which disavowed Hodža), a note handed over by Colonel Vix that demanded the military evacuation of Northern Hungary. Even the texts cited by Piahanau in support of his argument (like the article cited from the 29 November 1918 issue of Népszava) confirms this classic reading of the events and not a preparation of the public for concessions. They always make clear that the territorial delineations were reserved to the peace conference and that any territorial or administrative arrangements before were only temporary and did not represent the cession of territorial claims from the Hungarian side. Similarly problematic is the other case Piahanau highlights, the alleged junction between coal deliveries from Serbian-occupied Pécs to Budapest and the evacuation of the territory east of the river Tisza by Romanians in 1920. They again resulted from an external intervention that did not link the two, mostly because the

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evacuation was the result of the complicated Hungarian-Romanian relations, which vexed the peace conference for a very long time.\textsuperscript{7}

The last phase of the argument in this article, on how and why Hungary signed the treaty, is not tied into the larger transnational context again. Piahanau devotes significant space to the French-Hungarian negotiations from late 1919 to the summer of 1920. They involved the contemplation of, and concessions for, possible French investment in strategic sectors in Hungary—leasing the state railways for 90 years, building a Danube port, a hydroelectric plant, buying majority share of the Hungarian General Credit Bank, an affiliated bank of the Creditanstalt, etc. Piahanau argues that contrary to the claim of the historiography,\textsuperscript{8} Hungarian politicians did not really hope for territorial concessions in exchange for permission for these investments. Instead, they wished that French presence in Hungary’s key sectors would lead to the reestablishing of the economic zone of the erstwhile monarchy, and it was their main motive to sign the peace treaty. It is true that the economic side of these negotiations were hardly about territory, but Piahanau’s narrative does not clarify the relationship between the economic talks (initiated by Hungarian businessman Károly Halmos) and the political ones. Halmos’s initiative was initially rather apolitical, part of a broad retrenchment effort of Austro-Hungarian businesses which sought to salvage their assets with the help of “our French and Belgian friends.”\textsuperscript{9} It coincided with the effort of French businesses, among them the Schneider-Creuzot group, Paribas, and the Banque de l’Union Parisienne, to acquire strategic assets—but it was not driven by French politics.\textsuperscript{10}

In both countries politics followed business, and politicians tried to build on the economic retrenchment efforts for their own purposes.\textsuperscript{11} Energy and electricity were part of this broader European rearrangement, as is visibly shown by the case of the Constantinople Electricity and Tramways, a company in which the Hungarian General Creditbank, the target of French investment, together with French and Belgian businesses, had a major stake from before the First World War, and they continued its operation together after the end the hostilities and not as part of the political package. It is not a coincidence that after the Hungarian government realized that it could not expect territorial concessions from France, those parts of the deal which were political (most importantly leasing the state railways) fell through, while the business elements (investment in the Hungarian General Creditbank) became the foundation of strong interwar business cooperation. In the meantime, the Hungarian government still hoped to achieve some concessions during the border delineation process,\textsuperscript{12} based on a lettre d’envoi from French Prime Minister Alexandre Millerand that was attached to the final draft of the peace treaty. Originally it was dispatched as part of the political negotiations and promised that border delineation commissions could propose border rectifications. While Millerand was already gone as prime minister when the border commissions started their work, the Hungarian government’s local agents worked hard to mobilize the inhabitants of the villages around the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[11] For the history of the talks see Mária Ormos, “Francia-magyar”; Miklós Zeidler, “A Daniélou-misszió.” However, the starting point of these works is that it was politics that set the agenda of the negotiations.
\end{footnotes}
border who frequently demanded border changes from the commissions,\textsuperscript{13} showing also how much Hungarian politicians focused on territory instead of the economy.

Finally, the article leaves undiscussed one very important element of the energy story—the continuous operation of these businesses throughout 1918–1920 under direction from Budapest despite the fragmentation of the space through demarcation lines. Management of the mines that were owned by Budapest businesses remained in these hands even after their occupation. In the Czechoslovak case, it meant that the general manager of the Rimamurányi Salgótarjáni Kőszénbánya Rt (Rima), Pál Bíró, who was retained as the company’s general manager even during the Hungarian Soviet Republic, practically operated the company in that summer after crossing the demarcation line via correspondence with Budapest from Prague and Vienna. He could operate unhindered by any of the authorities. Rima was certainly not comparable to the large Silesian or Teschen mines, and this might explain why it was not brought under Czechoslovak state control.\textsuperscript{14} Still, Bíró’s mission in Central Europe is a telling episode of how another level of relations, the business one was instrumental in the final (re)distribution and (re)direction of energy resources.


\textsuperscript{13} One fascinating case is Prekmurje, where—as Jernej Kosi demonstrates in article “‘Yugoslavia Has Nothing. Yugoslavia Has No Bread. But Hungary Gives Us Bread’: Access to Food and (Dis)Loyalty in a ‘Redeemed’ Yugoslav Borderland.” (\textit{Austrian History Yearbook}, 2024, 1-15. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0067237824000055)—thousands of demonstrators speaking the local Slavic vernacular broke through the pickets of gendarms to present their demands to the commission in September 1921. I’m grateful to Jernej Kosi for letting me read his manuscript before publication.