
Review by Balázs Szalontai, East China Normal University

Zoltán Szőke’s article covers the secret mediatory efforts that the Hungarian Communist leadership made in 1965 and early 1966 with the aim of facilitating the start of negotiations between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and the United States and thus preventing a further escalation of the Vietnam War. On the basis of newly unearthed Hungarian archival documents, he refines and elaborates James G. Hershberg’s earlier analysis of Hungary’s peace diplomacy, and convincingly refutes a number of statements which János Radványi, a prominent Hungarian diplomatic defector, made during the Cold War and which have been hitherto regarded as reliable by a wide range of scholars.

Szőke’s arguments are based on a very wide range of primary and secondary sources. During his research in the Hungarian National Archives (MOL), he investigated not only the Foreign Ministry files on Hungarian-Vietnamese and U.S.-Hungarian relations but also the documents of the ruling Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (HSWP), such as the minutes of Politburo and Central Committee meetings. Furthermore, he carefully checked the reliability of the Hungarian files by comparing them with the documents kept in the U.S. and British National Archives, a method that enabled him to conclude that the various Hungarian-American and British-Hungarian diplomatic meetings were largely identically recorded by both sides. Szőke is also familiar with a number of up-to-

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date Western publications on the Vietnam War (including several works based on Russian, Polish and Chinese archival documents), and gives due credit to the scholars – László Borhi, Csaba Békés and James G. Hershberg – who first suggested a re-examination of Hungary’s role in the Vietnam War.

In his comprehensive analysis of the aforesaid sources, Szőke reveals various factual inaccuracies, tendentious misinterpretations and serious distortions in the picture which Radványi drew about the diplomatic steps taken by the HSWP leadership in general and Foreign Minister János Péter in particular. Above all, he persuasively demonstrates that “The Hungarian mediation ... was a good-faith effort aimed at achieving a peaceful settlement of the conflict” (124), instead of a deceitful scheme aimed at facilitating Hanoi’s military build-up. To his credit, Szőke also points out that Budapest’s peace diplomacy was not motivated by altruistic considerations but rather by a pragmatic Realpolitik. Among other factors, he pays due attention to the role of economics in Hungary’s difficult maneuvering between the two superpowers, and describes in detail how the aggravating Sino-Soviet rivalry induced the Kremlin to encourage its Hungarian and Polish satellites to play a mediating role in Vietnam. His arguments against Radványi’s allegations are solidly supported by documentary evidence. In fact, one may add that Radványi’s book contains even more inaccuracies than what is enumerated in Szőke’s article. For instance, Radványi describes North Vietnam’s land redistribution campaign (1955-1956) as a collectivization drive, though agricultural cooperativization actually started only several years later.

Szőke’s article also provides substantial insight into Hanoi’s diplomatic strategies and tactics by meticulously documenting how the North Vietnamese cadres reacted to Hungary’s various mediatory initiatives. His description about the disagreements which repeatedly occurred between Budapest and Hanoi – above all, the verbal clash between Le Duan and Jenő Fock in October 1965 and János Kádár’s angry reaction to the DRV’s rejection of Hungary’s mediation attempt – is of particular significance, all the more so because it proves that the aims of Hungary’s “bombing pause diplomacy” were by no means confined to assisting Hanoi in gaining some much-needed time. Had it been so, the aforesaid conflicts would not have taken place, since on various occasions the North Vietnamese leaders were quite willing to express an interest in peace talks merely to disguise their military preparations.

On the other hand, these disagreements seem to indicate that János Péter, just as Radványi claims, did lack direct and explicit authorization from Hanoi to mediate. Szőke seeks to resolve this contradiction as follows: “Because consensus within the VWP

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3 Radványi, Delusion and Reality, 18-19.

leadership over the question of peace talks seemed impossible, the Hungarians, if they wanted to complete what they had started, had to find a way to tip the balance in Hanoi toward the ‘pro-peace’ approach” (159) by creating a fait accompli. Unfortunately, this approach was doomed to failure, for various reasons. In Szőke’s opinion, the main cause of that fiasco was the Sino-Soviet split. This competition, he aptly points out, induced Moscow and its satellites to provide North Vietnam with massive quantities of arms, which in turn reinforced Hanoi’s commitment to a military option.

In my opinion, there was also another important factor at work, to which neither the Hungarian diplomats nor Szőke paid as much attention as the Vietnamese Communist leadership: that is, the issue of whether or not the National Liberation Front (NLF) of South Vietnam might participate in the would-be negotiations between Washington and Hanoi. As Szőke correctly notes, the HSWP leaders preferred to keep a certain distance from the NLF – probably not only because of the latter’s pro-Chinese inclinations (as he stresses) but also because they realized that the Americans were, at that stage of the conflict, clearly unwilling to enter talks with the Front.\(^5\) From Hanoi’s perspective, however, the role of the NLF was a crucial one, since the partial destruction of southern party organizations under the rule of Ngo Dinh Diem (1954-1963) had made the northern leaders painfully aware of the necessity of maintaining a permanent foothold in the South.

Finally, whether the Soviet Union’s interest in a peace diplomacy may have been more intensely motivated by military considerations than Hungary’s actions deserves further investigation. For instance, Radványi claims that on 6 September 1965, Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko told János Péter that “a bombing pause was essential, because this would give time to the Russian specialists working in the DRV to strengthen the air defense system.”\(^6\) Since Szőke’s article does not cover this particular Gromyko-Péter meeting, it is as of yet unclear if Radványi’s statement corresponds to the facts. What is known, however, is that in the spring of 1968, the officials of the Soviet Foreign Ministry did tell the Hungarian diplomats accredited in Moscow that a bombing halt, even a temporary one, “would create better opportunities for the DRV to deploy its troops to South Vietnam, of which the Americans are also aware. ... That is, the cancellation of the bombings would mean an increase in the DRV’s military opportunities, in exchange of which it could give its consent to such restrictions on its southward deployments which the San Antonio formula calls for.”\(^7\)

All in all, this article is an important contribution to the existing scholarship on the

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\(^5\) Ironically, the problem of NLF participation in the talks is covered more extensively in Radványi’s otherwise controversial book than in Szőke’s article. See Radványi, *Delusion and Reality*, 112-113, 125, 140.


Vietnam War in general and on East Europe’s involvement in that conflict in particular. Its tone is at times somewhat polemical, but the author successfully retains his objectivity throughout his analysis.

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