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Sparrow Mission: A US Intelligence Failure during World War II

Intelligence activities chiefly concern gathering and analyzing news and information from all sources. Their high value lies in the fact that based upon such intelligence reports, a country can put in effect certain actions that may decide the outcome of events. Naturally, during a war, conduct of such work is carried out on a larger scale and the stakes are similarly higher, since the outcome of a battle or perhaps the whole war might depend on it. Poor performance of sensitive intelligence work, however, may lead to the downfall of individuals, groups, governments, and even a whole country. Such was the case during World War II, when an Allied mission, organized by the Offices of Strategic Services (OSS), with the aim of helping Hungary leave the German bandwagon, partially, at least, produced the opposite effect. The failure, inefficient planning, and awkward timing of the Sparrow Mission in March 1944, contributed to the German occupation of Hungary to a large degree, thus preventing Hungary from ending the war on its part and enduring somewhat preferential treatment after the war.¹

When the United States entered the raging World War in December 1941, hardly did it expect to be at war with tiny Hungary. But, due to German pressure, that is exactly what Hungary declared on the United States on December 11, 1944. Illustrative of the pressured nature of the act is that László Bárdossy, Hungarian Prime Minister at that time, was “almost in tears” when he conveyed the declaration of war to Herbert C. Pell, US minister at Hungary.² President Franklin Delano Roosevelt did not take the incident seriously and a few months had passed before the United States returned the “favor.” Although Hungary was insignificant from a military point of view, its geographical situation rendered it some importance. Also, the government under Miklós Kállay from April 1942 clearly tried to pursue a distanced policy vis a vis Germany. An important feature of this policy was, in light of the fact that Germany was going to lose the war, that Hungary should try to establish
contact with the Anglo-Saxon powers and secure a mutual understanding that would ensure Hungary’s leaving the war.

The OSS was called into being in the summer of 1942 with the specific aim of analyzing strategic information required by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and conducting special operations if needed. Its director was General William J. Donovan, a competent executive and a close friend of FDR. The OSS established various strongholds in and around Europe, one of them being in Berne, Switzerland. Its chief was Allen W. Dulles, who barely managed to cross the French-Swiss border in late 1942 before the Germans closed it down. Switzerland was a neutral country, where intelligence work, or outright espionage activities, thrived by every side. It was here that Hungary managed to get in touch with the OSS and negotiated a possible action to establish some kind of cooperation between the two countries.³

The first contact was made in early March 1943. The Hungarian side wanted to have “non-committal conversations,” and approached the American side through Royall Tyler, who was the right-hand man of Allen Dulles and an expert on Hungary due to his many years spent there under the aegis of the League of Nations.⁴ Both Tyler and Dulles were “convinced [of the] good faith of this approach,” and the latter asked for instruction from the State Department as to how to proceed since he believed there were “unique possibilities” that “should be utilized.”⁵ Prodded by the confirmative answer, the Americans started long discussions with the Hungarians, especially with Leopold Baranyai, former President of the Hungarian National Bank, and a personal friend of Tyler.

For months, the secret talks centered on what Hungary wanted to achieve. The main points were that Hungary would be willing to antagonize Germany only if there was concrete backing from the Anglo-Saxon powers. Guarantees were highly needed for Hungary not only against possible German reprisals but the approaching Soviet Red Army. Such a scenario was only possible if the British and Americans had decided to make a Balkan landing and then to
proceed north toward Budapest and Vienna. Also, Hungary had the tactical disadvantage concerning the Soviet Union, the latter being the formal ally of the United States and Great Britain. The Hungarians did not analyze the situation correctly enough and did not make the right conclusion that for the United States, the main goal was defeating Hitler’s Germany and to keep the shaky alliance together at all costs. Hungarian whims could not earn serious considerations. As time went on, it became clear that there would be no second front in the Balkans, a pipedream of the Hungarians, but rather in Western Europe sometime in the spring of 1944. Basically, the uncertainty about the place of the second front helped the Americans ask for specific and sometimes vigorous steps on the Hungarian part. These were, among others, to prevent the transit of German troops across Hungary’s territory, to block such moves by rails across Hungary and make sure the Germans could not use Hungarian aerodromes, and, most importantly, to break with Germany. These demands obviously went farther than the Hungarians were prepared to commit themselves to in the spring and summer of 1943.

To make things slower, the State Department was not in a hurry deciding whether how much it wanted to make use of the Hungarian connection. The Berne section came up with the suggestion of sending in a radio operator with equipment whom the Hungarians were supposed to help with military information. By this course, the military side would be emphasized and the political thin ice would be avoided. Though the Hungarians accepted the offer, there was no agreement between the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the State Department in Washington. No wonder that in late August 1943, Dulles complained that “to date it has not been possible to obtain any commitments or opinion on matter from State notwithstanding [the] fact that we are in constant personal contact with [the Hungarians].” Almost a half year had gone by and all that the parties achieved was a tentative proposal not backed by official American circles and given the green light by the Hungarians only in principle. Pressure was
also put on Hungary by its own citizens from America. There were a group of notable Hungarians working on establishing better relations with the White House. As they informed the Hungarian pro-Western channels, “Hungary’s situation in Washington has recently improved as far as there is a disposition at present to reach an understanding with Hungary. Terms certainly should be presented to and agreed upon with President Roosevelt, who is in sympathy with Hungary.” As for the Swiss contact, the same person characterized it as “much too slow.” It was not until mid-September that the JCS issued directives according to which subversive activities in Hungary were desirable. Also in early fall, Ferenc Bakach-Bessenyey arrived as the new Hungarian Minister to Switzerland and he was the chief negotiating partner for Dulles and Tyler. At long last, more concrete points were discussed.

There were varying alternatives as to the possible future mission. First, a radio operator was to come into Hungary by parachute, which later was changed into sending such a man across the Croatian border in a clandestine way. The first sole-radio-operator idea later was changed into a two-man project, only to be transformed into a mission comprising of four men, the fourth of which, a former First Secretary of the United States Legation in Budapest, simply did not arrive back from Mexico in time to join the team. Thus, the most knowledgeable person of the mission was out. There were other impediments. The Americans first said the mission must wait because they had difficulty finding the right personnel, but when they had their men, there was a further delay because of the partisan situation south of Hungary, which rendered the border crossing too insecure and caused a return to the original parachuting plan. The role of the mission was volatile too. Originally it was to gather intelligence, then it was changed into transmitting military and other information provided by the Hungarians, and, in the end, it was supposed to contact the highest authorities and carrying out negotiations as to how Hungary could leave the German camp. But as the OSS informed its British counterpart, “Party is not repeat not authorised to make or accept peace
feelers.” One is tempted to speculate how much the United States wanted Hungary to leave the war.

The Hungarian side was clearly slow in making up its mind as well. They were so much afraid of what the Germans might do in case they got wind of such talks that they wanted to play it safe. Kállay first wanted to cleanse his General Staff because it was packed with pro-German elements. To make any fast decision unlikely, the Hungarians received reports that British and American contacts in Istanbul and Lisbon, respectively, advised “to lie low and do nothing.” Clearly, the clandestine American organizations were not at harmony with each other and different centers tended to interpret and execute directives at liberty. To complicate life further for the Hungarian government, news reached them that Archduke Otto, perhaps the most prominent person representing Hungary in the United States, met with FDR on several occasions. After their meeting on October 1, 1943, the President asked Otto to convey his words to Hungary, according to which “if Hungary brought itself to settle its relation with the Allies, the Allies would accept Hungary as co-belligerent, naturally, then Hungary, at the right time, should turn against Germany.” Such contradictory views led to the loss of precious time. Hungary would have needed to act as soon as possible, but both external and internal circumstances thwarted a quick decision.

It was understandable that Hungary was extremely careful not to give a pretense for Germany to occupy it. That would have meant the end of any realistic non-belligerent status and would have closed the doors for Hungary to pursue a Western-oriented policy. Secrecy was high but not high enough. The London Times published reports of the allegedly secret activity, while German agents, who penetrated almost every country on the continent as well as Hungary, provided crucial information as to possible Hungarian tendencies, so the German counterintelligence knew what was in the offing. They could read some of the cables going in and out of Berne, for example, and were well informed about the goals of their disloyal
satellite. Such a fact was sure to play against any action the OSS and the Hungarians might have together. What is somewhat shocking is that the Americans knew that the Germans were doing this. In spite of this, in early November an important telegram arrived from Washington: “JCS have approved specifically effort to detach H[ungary] and other satellites from Axis immediately. Adolf [Hitler is] aware of this decision and informing his boys. JCS directive should govern your attitude.” Therefore, the conclusion is obvious. The United States, despite knowing the fact that Germany knew of Hungary’s attempts of deserting the war, and fully realizing what implications it might have for Hungary, namely German occupation, consciously followed the policy of trying to induce the Hungarians to collaborate and provide military intelligence, the value of which could not have been really high. Dulles made the right evaluation when he cabled Washington, “Personally [I] am skeptical unless we arrived in such force as to make outcome reasonably certain. Program would be risky with present government in power unless German collapse already under way.” He showed considerable knowledge of Hungarian characteristics in general when he added, “Hungarians are easy going unheroic people [and] they are unlikely take course which involves immediate risks.” Under pressure, however, the Hungarians decided to proceed, but it led to a further loss of time.

It is questionable at best whether the OSS had the moral right to continue with any mission in face of such evidence. Also, Hungary was still considered to be an independent country containing the last and largest intact Jewish community in Europe, whose fate was certainly sealed if the Germans and their followers in Hungary managed to take over. War is, however, not about morality but winning, and whatever small advantage the United States may have realized, it was ready to take it independent of what consequences it might have for Hungary. It must be noted too that, after all, Hungary was an enemy country. It may have
been too much to expect from the United States to change courses and give certain privileges for an enemy, even if that country may have served some useful end.

In any event, by late fall, the plan of a mission to be sent to Hungary was starting to take shape in the OSS office in Berne. The “JCS approved the contact and reiterated their interest in the possibility of detaching Hungary,” and Donovan himself sent a cable concluding, “It seems well worth doing.” It is doubtful whether such a mission had any realistic success. The OSS people in Berne realized the “appallingly difficult situation” of the Hungarian government and that if a German occupation did take place, “many in governing circles will probably be slaughtered,” not to speak of the Jewish community. Still, when Baranyai attempted to explain to them such dangers, Dulles and Tyler are reported to have answered, “there is a war on, we are up to our necks in blood, a few hundred thousand lives here and there will not make a difference.” Dulles expressed his doubts over the possibility of detaching Hungary from Germany unless an Allied landing took place in the Balkans, the possibility of which after the Teheran Conference came to naught. The United States was trying to put pressure on the German satellite states in the political realm as well. On December 11, 1943 the US government officially called upon Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania to withdraw from Germany’s side in the war. Above all, the main interest for the United States lay in weakening the other side and winning the war.

In relation to such goals, there was another side to the Allied thinking. Since obviously Hungary did not carry so much weight militarily, why the effort even if sometimes half-hearted? There seems to be an explanation. If somehow miraculously the mission achieved its limited goal and this gave the Hungarians the push to leave the German camp, it was all worth it. On the other hand, if the Germans, who were suspicious of Hungary and knew about the negotiations between the Hungarians and the Anglo-Saxons, occupied Hungary, they should divert troops from Western Europe, thus a weaker Nazi army would face the invasion in
1944. No clear evidence exists that this was indeed the two-sided military policy of the United States, but Joachim Ribbentrop, German Foreign Minister, later claimed that the fear of parachute divisions made them occupy Hungary, while Hitler, who moved three of his best divisions from France in August 1944, claimed that the Allied landing “would probably have never occurred” had the SS Panzer Korps been in the West. Nazi intelligence officer Wilhelm Höttl in a testimony later answered the question as to what influence the Sparrow Mission had on German occupation on Hungary: “This mission had vital influence on it… Sure, there was the possibility of other events which also could have unleashed it… Duke’s arrival and arrest set the machinery in motion. Hitler considered his arrival as the Fait Accompli, as Hungary’s betraying him… Kaltenbrunner later on personally told me that Hitler, in front of Himmler and Ribbentrop, had shouted upon hearing of Duke’s arrival: I always told you that the Hungarians ultimately will try to stab us in the back. And this is what’s happening right now.” The OSS activities prepared the German occupation of Hungary to a significant degree.

As the aforementioned points show, Sparrow Mission, which was finally dropped in Hungary on March 16, 1944, had some impact on German behavior. Although the Germans had decided the occupation of Hungary earlier, and the arrival of the mission in fact was not the sole triggering reason for it, the dragging negotiations between Hungary and the Allies had given ample evidence for Hitler to feel vindicated that the only right step would be to march into Hungary and set up a loyal government. The German occupation on March 19, 1944, meant the end of Hungarian independence. The Germans quickly arrested those who they deemed enemies of the Reich and took total military control over Hungary. As for the fate of the Sparrow Mission, it did not achieve anything. The OSS for days did not know anything about the mission. All they knew was that “Sparrow dropped successfully” on the 17th. It was actually brought to Budapest just one day before the occupation. The three men
found themselves in German hands soon and their long captivity and transfer from prison to prison and country to country ended only in the spring of 1945. Not only were the members of the mission unable to make the contact with the highest persons in the government, their lives were in danger. Hungary had to face the harsh reality of an occupied country for the next year before the Soviet Red Army, in some of the stiffest battles in the whole war, chased the Germans out only to take their place.

How should then the mission be evaluated as an intelligence effort aimed to achieve greater results? Before anything else, the goals must be compared with the outcome. When Duke two decades later asked for details about the background of his mission to Hungary, Dulles’ office provided him with the following: “The minimum result hoped for was to obtain military intelligence through the Hungarian contacts the mission was to establish. The maximum was to test the bona fides of some Hungarian government officials who had made contact with the Office of Strategic Services in Switzerland.” If the latter was indeed the goal then the mission was not needed in the first place; Tyler and Dulles had previously testified as to the credibility of their contacts. The OSS knew that the desperate Hungarian effort to finish the war was authentic and there could not have been any question to its sincerity. If the “minimum result” was indeed to gather some military intelligence, then again, the motive is highly questionable. The Hungarians provided the OSS with data concerning any information they were asked for. True, on the ground it would have been easier to collect more information but as for its significantly higher value compared to the lives of the three members of the mission, the conclusion again is that it was simply not worth it.

Sparrow Mission was clearly a failure. Not only because they were captured. That, after all, was not their mistake and neither the Hungarians’. The German occupation was clearly brewing and both the Hungarians and supposedly the Americans knew it. Perhaps, it would have been best to call the whole plan off in face of such circumstances. The German
occupation naturally nullified any realistic hope of achieving any “minimum” or “maximum” results. According to an OSS memorandum still during the war, “a serious stumbling block in our dealings with the Hungarians was the lack of a clearly defined policy, and directives, with regard to the treatment of Axis satellite states from the State Department and JCS, which prevented us from taking any definite steps involving political questions until November 1943.”

Clearly, one of the most conspicuous shortcomings of this mission was lack of good coordination. This was true not only between the JCS and the State Department, Budapest and Berne, but also between the OSS centers in Berne, Algiers, Lisbon, and Istanbul, and as the OSS memo mentioned, between Berne and Washington. Berne kept putting pressure on the Hungarians without giving any concrete promise, which they, of course, could not do, while the Hungarians were all along in a very precarious situation. Lack of thorough planning, another basic element of a successful mission, was missing too. The plan changed too many times as to how many persons would take part and how they would enter Hungary. This was a fault of both sides and the lack of early agreement on this did not augur well for the mission either. The members were gathered in a hasty manner and their training was insufficient as well (the leader of the mission, Duke, made his maiden jump when in Hungary in action due to lack of time in the training camp), although in the end this factor did not hurt the mission.

Maybe worst of all, the Germans could read some of the American cables in and out of Berne, and they were also aware of Hungarian activities, thus a major piece of intelligence work, that of secrecy was never achieved. Partly as a consequence of the failed mission, pro-Western Hungarians were arrested by the Germans and hundreds of thousand of Jews were deported to death camps and murdered. Moreover, there was no further chance for Hungary to get rid of the German pressure and to leave the war – the end result of which, ultimately, was that Hungary was helplessly sucked into the Soviet sphere of influence. The United States during
the war concentrated more on to beat the Germans and to keep the alliance together than to postwar political possibilities, especially in Central Europe.
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1 The German occupation of Hungary has had a prominent literature in Hungarian historiography, some of which dealt with the Sparrow Mission. However, these studies usually treated the Mission as of secondary nature and always a part of the bigger picture, which is understandable. Much can be learned from various autobiographies, such as Duke, Name, Rank, and Serial Number; Kállay, Hungarian Premier, and Kádár, A Ludovikától Sopronkőhidáig. The Mission was the source of a fiction novel recently, too, Beal, Sparrow.
2 Pell, Memoirs, Folder: Herbert Pell, Trip to Hungary, Container 20, Herbert Claiborne Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library; Also ee, Baker, Brahmin in Revolt, 235, and Barcza, “My Memoirs as a Diplomat,” 95-96.

3 Hungary was also active for some time in inducing the British to help them with a mission of their own, but, in the end, nothing came of it, despite that a preliminary armistice agreement with the British Ambassador was signed off the coast of Istanbul in September 1943. In detail see, Juhász, Magyar-Brit titkos tárgyalások 1943-ban.


5 Ibid.

6 387 out, July 3, 1943, 443 out, July 15, 1943, Ibid.

7 479 in, August 29, 1943, Ibid.

8 Eckhardt’s telegram to Bethlen, July 30, 1943, Box 2, Folder: Bethlen, Count Istvan, 1941-1944, Tibor Eckhardt Papers, Hoover Institution Archives (hereafter cited as TEP).

9 Ibid.


14 Bakach-Besseneyey to Ghyczy, October 14, 1943, Ibid., 176.


16 Telegram, October 26, 1943, Subseries 4K Telegrams d'état, 1942-1945, ADP-DF.

17 Eckhardt to Bethlen, October 1, 1943, Box 2, Folder: Bethlen, Count Istvan, 1941-1944, TEP.

18 Borhi, Hungary in the Cold War, 20.


20 Telegram, No. 2699, November 3, 1943, Subseries 4K Telegrams d'état, 1942-1945, ADP-DF.

21 Telegram, November 24, 1943, Ibid. The source of his opinion may very well have come from the Hungarian foreign minister’s message to Switzerland, in which he wrote, “I very much hope that the relations will not break off, but we would have to bow to this, because, at the moment, our efficiency is very limited and as perhaps Mr. T. knows as well, we do not possess special tendency for conspiracy.” Ghyczy to Bakach-Besseneyey, November 16, 1943, In. Vass, “The Negotiations of György Bakach-Besseneyey,” 187.

22 Telegram, No. 3106, December 14, 1943, and Telegram, No. 2436, January 17, 1944. Subseries 4K Telegrams d'état, 1942-1945, ADP-DF.

23 Telegram, December 4, 1943, Ibid.

24 Borhi, Hungary in the Cold War, 31.

25 Telegram, December 17, 1943, Subseries 4K Telegrams d'état, 1942-1945, ADP-DF.

26 Borhi, Hungary in the Cold War, 30.

27 As the historian László Borhi put it, “In a nutshell, Hungary and the rest of the minor satellites were unimportant in themselves, but for a short time became militarily significant: by deserting their German ally they could reduce German resistance and hasten Allied victory over Germany.” Borhi, Hungary in the Cold War, 22.

28 Ibid., 31.

29 Hottl became leader of the Viennese Department VI station on the pattern of the Reich Security Administration’s Department VI, in 1939, later he was posted for a while as an advisor to the German ambassador to Hungary, then returned to Vienna. He was considered an expert on Hungary. On his career see, Introduction by David Kahn, In. Hottl, The Secret Front, ii-ix.

30 Ernst Kaltenbrunner was Chief of the RSHA (Reichssicherheitshauptamt - Reich Main Security Office) from 1943.

32 Telegram, No. 2205, March 17, 1944. Subseries 4K Telegrams d'etat, 1942-1945, ADP-DF.
34 Houston to Duke, October 29, 1965, Series I, Correspondence, Box 32, Folder 11, Hungary, 1918-1968, ADP.