The Domestic Politics of the Bethlen Government, 1921-1925

Thomas Lorman

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Abstract

This thesis does not seek to provide a comprehensive overview of the first five years of the premiership of István Bethlen. Instead, each of its six chapters deals with a specific question relating to the operation of his government, and from these general conclusions can be drawn.

It begins with a short introduction relating to Bethlen’s background and Hungary in 1921. This thesis will also discuss the sources that the research is based upon. The first chapter analyses Bethlen’s relationship with the parties that initially supported his government and his attempt to create a ‘Unified Party’. The second chapter examines the way he sought to normalize relations with the Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt, (MSZDP), (Hungarian Social Democratic Party), break their election boycott and bring them back into the fold of parliamentary life prior to the 1922 elections. The third chapter analyses the 1922 elections and considers the franchise, the parties involved and the outcome. The fourth chapter uses an analysis of the struggle between Bethlen and the right-radical wing of the party through 1922-1923 as a means of measuring the extent to which the Unified Party was genuinely unified and/or controlled by Bethlen. The fifth chapter asks why his attempt to modernize and expand the Unified Party was unsuccessful and failed to provide a greater role for the party within the government. The sixth chapter considers the reasons why the government’s relations with the MSZDP began to deteriorate from 1922 onwards to the point that Bethlen was faced with a parliamentary boycott at the end of 1924. It elucidates how and why Bethlen allowed this situation to come about and how he was able to crush the boycott without seriously affecting either the policies or credibility of his government. The conclusion establishes that Bethlen did have an ideology which sought to continue and in some areas develop the pre-war
‘system’ established by István Tisza. This ideology shaped Bethlen’s approach to each of the political issues raised in the preceding six chapters.

This thesis, based on extensive primary and secondary sources, provides a basis from which a truly comprehensive history of the Bethlen government can be written.
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## Appendix 1: Abbreviations of Organizations and Parties

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>Anti Bolsevista Comite</td>
<td>Anti-Bolshevik Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>AFOSZ</td>
<td>Általános Fogyasztási Szövetkezet</td>
<td>General Consumers Co-operative</td>
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<tr>
<td>EKSZ</td>
<td>Etelközi Szövetség</td>
<td>Etelköz Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>ÉME</td>
<td>Ébredő Magyarok Egyesület</td>
<td>Union of Awakening Hungarians</td>
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<tr>
<td>FOSZ</td>
<td>Földmunkások Országos Szövetsége</td>
<td>National Association of Landworkers</td>
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<tr>
<td>GYOSZ</td>
<td>Gyáriparosak Országos Szövetség</td>
<td>National Association of Manufacturers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KNEP</td>
<td>Keresztény Nemzeti Egyesülés Pártja</td>
<td>Party of Christian National Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>MOVE</td>
<td>Magyar Országos Véderő Egyesület</td>
<td>Hungarian National Defence Force Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>MSZDP</td>
<td>Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt</td>
<td>Hungarian Social Democratic Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MTI</td>
<td>Magyar Távirati Iroda</td>
<td>Hungarian News Agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>NMP</td>
<td>Nemzeti Munka Párt</td>
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National Party of Work

OFB = Országos Föld Bíróság
National Land Court

OMGE = Országos Magyar Gazdasági Egyesület
National Hungarian Economic Union

PMSZ = Polgárok és Munkások Szövetség
Association of Citizens and Workers
Appendix 2: Abbreviations of Documentary Source Collections

BML = Baranya Megyei Levéltár - Főispáni bizalmas iratai
Baranya County Archive - Confidential Papers of the Főispán

FML = Fejér Megyei Levéltár - Főispáni bizalmas iratai,
Fejér County archive - Confidential Papers of the Főispán

MTA = Magyar Tudományos Akadémiai Levéltár
Archive of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences

OLK.26 = (Magyar) Országos Levéltár - Miniszterelnökség iratai
Hungarian National Archive - Documents of the Prime Minister's Office

OLK.27 = (Magyar) Országos Levéltár - Minisztertanács jegyzőkönyvei
Hungarian National Archive - Minutes of Cabinet Meetings

OLK.35 = (Magyar) Országos Levéltár - Gömbös Gyula iratai
Hungarian National Archive - Papers of Gyula Gömbös

OLK.64 = (Magyar) Országos Levéltár - Külgügyminisztérium iratai
Hungarian National Archive - Documents of the Foreign Ministry

OLK.148 = (Magyar) Országos Levéltár - Belügyminisztérium iratai
OLK.149 = Hungarian National Archive - Documents of the Interior Ministry

OLK.429 = (Magyar) Országos Levéltár - Kozma Miklós iratai
Hungarian National Archive - Papers of Miklós Kozma

OLK.468 = (Magyar) Országos Levéltár - Bethlen István iratai
Hungarian National Archive - Papers of István Bethlen
OLK.808 = (Magyar) Országos Levéltár - Bencs Zoltán iratai
Hungarian National Archive - Papers of Zoltán Bencs

OLP.4 = (Magyar) Országos Levéltár - Andrássy Gyula iratai
Hungarian National Archive - Papers of Gyula Andrássy

PML = Pest Megyei Levéltár - Főispáni bizalmas iratai,
Pest County archive - Confidential Papers of the Főispán

PTSA = Politikai Történeti és Szakszervezeti Archívum,
Archive of Political History and the Trade Unions,

VML = Vas Megyei Levéltár - Főispáni bizalmas iratai,
Vas County Archive - Confidential Papers of the Főispán
Introduction

The history of Hungary in the 1920's is dominated by the figure of István Bethlen. He became prime minister in 1921 of a country which had within the previous three years witnessed the collapse of the Habsburg monarchy, lost two-thirds of its historic territory, experienced both a Bolshevik dictatorship and a violent counter-revolution, and was still in the throes of real economic, social, and political instability. In his ten years as prime minister, Bethlen is credited with returning the country to an even keel. He constructed a political system that would remain fundamentally unaltered until 1944, and the new party he created governed Hungary throughout this entire period. ¹

Under Bethlen the pragmatic sanction was annulled, the socialist party's parliamentary boycott was ended, the parliamentary franchise was reformed, the upper house of the parliament was restored, the first ever Hungarian land reform was applied and extended, a national bank was established, the country was reconnected to the international money markets, and a swathe of legislation was passed affecting all areas of the country's economic, social, and political activities.

Historians have not, however, in general given the Bethlen government proper attention: the first serious biography of Bethlen was only published in 1991. Problems with the primary source material have also affected historical research: some material has disappeared and some material has only recently been made fully available. Even in regards to the research that has been conducted, no consensus about how to define the Bethlen regime has yet emerged, as a review of the published literature on the Bethlen government makes clear.

¹ For a detailed account of Bethlen's activities prior to 1918 see Ignác Romsics, István Bethlen: A Great Conservative Statesman of Hungary, 1874-1946, New York, 1995 (hereafter Romsics, István Bethlen) pp.3-86.
A Review of Historical Work on the Bethlen Government’s Domestic Policies.²

Of the works written by Bethlen’s contemporaries, Gusztáv Gratz’s book on the 1919-1920 period, and his overview of the entire inter-war period stand out as perceptive accounts from a writer with an inside knowledge of events and intimately acquainted with the leading figures of the period.³ Antal Balla’s history of the Hungarian parliament does deal with the first years of Bethlen’s government but is somewhat lacking in detail and analysis.⁴ A more considered work is by Mihály Kerék on the land question.⁵ He provides a wealth of detail on issues such as the land reform. Also of value is Rezső Rudai’s overview of the government and opposition within the parliament, but it is more a statistical analysis placed in a historical context, than a carefully argued study.⁶ Of lesser relevance but nevertheless important are the ‘insider’ accounts of Aladár Boroviczény on relations between the government and Charles IV,⁷ Zoltán Bodrogközy on the Smallholder Party,⁸ and the intelligent writing of Zoltán Magyary on public administration.⁹ Contemporary biographies of Bethlen, however, largely fail to provide a serious analysis of either his government or any of

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³ Gusztáv Gratz, A forradalmak kora, Budapest, 1935 (hereafter Gratz, A forradalmak kora); Gusztáv Gratz, Magyarország a két háború között, Budapest, 2001 (hereafter Gratz, Magyarország a két háború között).


⁵ Mihály Kerék, A magyar földkérdés, Budapest, 1939 (hereafter Kerék, A magyar földkérdés).

⁶ Rezső Rudai, A politikai ideológia, párt szerkezet, hivatás és életkor szerepe a magyar képviselőház és a pártok életében, (1861-1935), Budapest, 1936.


⁸ Zoltán Bodrogközy, A Magyar agrármozgalmak története, Budapest, 1929.

⁹ Zoltán Magyary, Magyar közigazgatás: A közigazgatás szerepe a xx. sz. államában, Budapest, 1942.
his policies. Instead their value stems from the picture they draw of his general character.10

Overall, inter-war writers benefited from a direct experience of the events they were describing (Boroviczény, Gratz, Magyary) and they are refreshingly free from dogmatic Marxist interpretations. However, they lacked access to most primary source material and none of them chose to undertake a solid analysis of the politics of the Bethlen government.

The official release of relevant documents after 1945 should have heralded fresh opportunities for serious and objective research. Unfortunately historians were constrained by the Communist regime’s decision to regard Bethlen as synonymous with the entire inter-war period, which was officially denounced as ‘fascist’. As marked out by Erzsébet Andics as early as 1945, the Bethlen government was described as striving for absolute dictatorship.11 The only real question was how far it managed to fulfil this objective. Any other political party, organization or perspective that failed to conduct unyielding opposition was dismissed as being made up of ‘opportunists’, ‘traitors’ or worse. This viewpoint was sacrosanct within Hungary until 1970 and all historians were required to reflect this perspective in their research.

Nevertheless, one cannot simply dismiss out of hand the research that emerged before 1970. Some of the work from this period retains a certain value, if only in raising points that need to be challenged. Works on the peasantry suffer from a determination to dismiss, or even worse overlook, their political representatives,12 while the numerous overviews of the socialist opposition split their efforts between a denunciation of the MSZDP, and a preoccupation with the affairs of the miniscule

10 Dénes Sebess, Bethlen István; Miklós Suranyi, Bethlen, Budapest, 1927; Edgar von Schmidt-Pauli, Graf Stefan Bethlen, Berlin, 1931.
the communist party. As for the fajvédôk, (right-radicals), Endre Szokoly’s work on Gömbös potentially offers much new information but is devoid of references, and therefore must be treated with extreme suspicion. Typical of the poor quality of much of the research in this period is Elek Karsai’s review of each prime minister of the inter-war period. As head of the national archives, Karsai had the opportunity to produce a comprehensive piece of work, but instead wrote a rather flimsy account, obviously skewed by ideological considerations. Another disappointment is Ilona Pándi’s work on parties and classes which could easily be overlooked had it not included a rare attempt to analyse the way the Unified Party functioned.

However, the works of Dezsô Nemes as well as Miklós Szinai and László Szücs’s introduction to their publication of documents present a more serious approach, supported by an impressive range of documentary evidence, and offering a full account of the politics of the Bethlen government. Fleshed out with articles by, for example, Károly Jenei and László Réti, their approach continues to exert an influence upon present-day analyses of the Bethlen government. There are also other historians whose publications remain indispensable to the modern historian. The works of Mária Ormos on the foreign loan of 1924 András Fehér on the Hungarian


\[\text{14} \]Endre Szokoly, ...és Gömbös Gyula a kapitány, Budapest, 1960 (hereafter Szokoly, ...és Gömbös Gyula a kapitány).

\[\text{15} \]Elek Karsai, A budai Sándor-palotában történt, Budapest, 1967 (hereafter Karsai, A budai Sándor-palotában történt).

\[\text{16} \]Ilona Pándi, Osztályok és párkok a Bethlen-konszolidáció időszakában, Budapest, 1966 (hereafter Pándi, Osztályok és párkok).

\[\text{17} \]Dezsô Nemes, Az ellenforradalom története Magyarországon 1919-1921, Budapest, 1962 (hereafter Nemes, Az ellenforradalom története Magyarországon); Dezsô Nemes, Iratok az ellenforradalom történetéhez, 3 vols, Budapest, 1956 (hereafter Nemes, Iratok).

\[\text{18} \]Miklós Szinai and László Szücs, Bethlen István titkos iratai, Budapest, 1972 (hereafter Szinai and Szücs, Titkos iratai). See also Miklós Szinai, 'Bethlen és az ellenforradalmi rendszer', Valóság, 1972/1.

\[\text{19} \]Károly Jenei, 'Az ellenforradalom támadása az Általános Fogyasztási Szövetkezet ellen és az "első" Bethlen-Peyer paktum', Századok, 1962/3-4 (hereafter Jenei, 'Az ellenforradalom támadása az Általános Fogyasztási Szövetkezet ellen').

\[\text{20} \]László Réti, 'A Bethlen-Peyer paktum', Századok, 84, 1950/1-4 (hereafter Réti, 'A Bethlen-Peyer paktum').

\[\text{21} \]Mária Ormos, Az 1924. évi magyar államkölcsön megszerzése, Budapest, 1964 (hereafter Ormos, Az 1924. évi magyar államkölcsön megszerzése).
Social Democratic Party between 1919 and 1921,\textsuperscript{22} Lajos Serfőző on the same party in the 1922-1926 period,\textsuperscript{23} József Ruszoly on electoral corruption\textsuperscript{24} and even Mrs. Rudolf Dósa on the right-radical Magyar Országos Véderő Egyesület, (MOVE), (Hungarian National Defence Force Union),\textsuperscript{25} remain the key texts in their respective fields. Also of note are the works of Iván Berend and György Rânki on economic history which retain an important place in Hungarian historiography.\textsuperscript{26} These works retain an importance partly due to the large amount of detail and original research in their works, however, their argumentation still needs to be carefully re-examined.

Viewed overall one comes to the conclusion that much of the work from the 1950’s and 1960’s period is flawed. It is not just a question of needing to strip out the misleading Marxist rhetoric. The use of sources is selective; the argumentation is questionable; and the interpretations are ideologically motivated. Even within Hungary the overarching first premise that the regime was ‘fascist’ came to be regarded as too inflexible. By 1970 a debate had broken out within the Hungarian Academy of Sciences over the way the Bethlen government was being characterized.\textsuperscript{27} Although Nemes was still arguing in 1976 that the Bethlen government was fascist,\textsuperscript{28} the key turning point came in 1971 with a joint work by the leading historians Péter Hanák, Miklós Lackó and György Rânki.\textsuperscript{29} They redefined the regime as authoritarian and reactionary, a viewpoint reflected in the official

\textsuperscript{24} József Ruszoly, A választási bíróságkodás Magyarországon a két nemzetgyűlés idején 1920-1926, Szeged, 1968 (hereafter Ruszoly, Választási bíróságkodás).
\textsuperscript{25} Dósa, Mrs. Rudolf, A MOVE, Egy jellegzetes magyar fasiszta szervezet. 1918-1944, Budapest, 1972 (hereafter Dósa, A MOVE).
\textsuperscript{26} See for example Berend and Ránki, Magyarország gazdasága az első világháború után 1919-1929, Budapest, 1966.
\textsuperscript{27} This debate is discussed in Romsics, István Bethlen p.427.
\textsuperscript{28} Dezso Nemes, A fasizmus kérdéséhez, Budapest, 1976.
\textsuperscript{29} Péter Hanák, Miklós Lackó, György Ránki, ‘Gazdaság, társadalom, társadalmi-politikai gondolkodás Magyarországon a kapitalizmus korában’ in (ed.) György Spira, Vita Magyarország kapitalizmuskori fejlődéséről, Budapest, 1971.
history of the inter-war period published in 1976. This is a bland work although a marked improvement on the histories of Hungary published in the 1950’s and 60’s. Its real value, however, stems from its confirmation that the party line had changed. Among those who now took the opportunity to re-examine earlier conclusions were Ferenc Pölöskei on the 1919-1922 period, Zsuzsa Nagy on the liberal parties, Jenő Gergely on the Christian socialists, József Sipos on the Smallholder Party in 1921-1922, and Péter Sipos on the MSZDP and trade unions.

This is not to say that these works were free of ideological bias. While the communist regime’s view of the Bethlen government had altered, historians were still required to remain within the new limits. A positive view of the Bethlen government, or any of its activities, remained strictly beyond the pale. However, read in relation to what had come before, a marked improvement took place in the 1970’s and early 1980’s that ensured much of the research from this period continues to have value for the present day historian.

The new interpretations of the Bethlen government offered by Hungarian historians also moved closer to those held by historians outside Hungary. From the

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30 Magyarország története, ii, (relevant sections written by Zsuzsa Nagy, Kálmán Szakacs, and Iván Berend).
31 See for example (eds.) F.Molnár, E.Pam lényi, G.Székely, Magyarország története, 2 vols, Budapest, 1967 (hereafter Molnár, Magyarország története).
32 Ferenc Pölöskei, Horthy és hatalmi rendszere, Budapest, 1977 (hereafter Pölöskei, Horthy és hatalmi rendszere); Ferenc Pölöskei, Hungary After Two Revolutions, Budapest, 1980 (hereafter Pölöskei, Hungary After Two Revolutions).
1920's foreign writers had been scathing about the Bethlen system. Émigrés such as Oscar Jász and, later, Dezső Sulyok helped reinforce this opinion. Historians such as William Batkay and Andrew Janos, re-examining the Bethlen government in the 1970's and 80's were also critical of the way the regime had operated. Free from ideological constraints, Janos, and particularly Batkay, produced work that any historian of the Bethlen government must take into account. They were, however, limited in their access to source materials and were forced to rely primarily on published research from within Hungary, which still adhered to the Marxist interpretation.

C.A Macartney, while covering the Bethlen government only in passing, avoided such pitfalls and thus presented the Bethlen government in an entirely different light. His own personal experiences, range of contacts and his formidable skills as a historian, as well as a certain admiration for the 'old regime', enabled him to look at the Bethlen government from a perspective that retains its value to the present day. Other English speaking historians who contributed to an understanding of the period, include Joseph Held on the peasantry, Leslie Tihany on the dispute over Baranya county, and István Mócsy who produced a useful study of the role of exiles in the Bethlen government and a particularly poor monograph on Bethlen as prime minister. Also of interest are the histories of inter-war Eastern Europe by

Joseph Rothschild and Hugh Seton-Watson, which while lacking in detail, do seek to offer an overall picture of the Bethlen government. Oddly very little serious original research has emerged from other European countries. Beyond a few short overviews of the Bethlen regime, of greatest relevance is Benigna von Krusenstjern’s history of the Smallholder Party from 1909-1929.

By the 1980’s, new historians had emerged within Hungary who were able to capitalize on new academic freedoms and the end of communist rule in 1989. In particular Ignác Romsics emerged as the leading scholar of the Bethlen period. He has written several important works, including the first serious biography of Bethlen, and has become the pre-eminent Hungarian scholar of the Bethlen government. We should, nevertheless, treat with some caution his claim in 1999 that ‘in the past ten years not a single document has come forward and not a single book has been written which would make a reconsideration of Bethlen’s life necessary’.

On the contrary, a willingness to think anew is pervading Hungarian historians’ approach to the Bethlen government. This is typified by József Sipos’s comments to the 1994 Országos Jelenkörténeti Konferencia, (National Conference on Modern History), where he declared that ‘the specialist literature has not dealt [with the Smallholder Party] as it deserves’: an admirable claim, bearing in mind that Sipos had contributed much of this ‘specialist literature’! Other historians who have begun to rethink earlier conclusions include József Kardos on the legitimists, László

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47 Ignác Romsics, Ellenforradalom és konszolidáció, Budapest, 1982, (Romsics, Ellenforradalom és konszolidáció); Ignác Romsics, Gróf Bethlen István politikai palyája, Budapest, 1987 (Romsics, Gróf Bethlen István politikai palyája); Romsics, István Bethlen, A New York
Hubai on the elections,\textsuperscript{51} Péter Sipos on the trade unions and their relationship with the MSZDP,\textsuperscript{52} and Elizabeth Boross on the economy.\textsuperscript{53} Furthermore excellent biographies have recently appeared on Miklós Kozma, one of Bethlen’s key advisers,\textsuperscript{54} and Gyula Gömbös.\textsuperscript{55} A number of general histories have also been published which reflect the ongoing changes but, unfortunately, lack the detailed analysis necessary to further a reconsideration of the Bethlen government.\textsuperscript{56}

Outline of Thesis

This brief overview of the published literature points to the way the domestic politics of the Bethlen government will be appraised in this thesis. First, this thesis will re-examine the arguments of earlier historians, particularly Marxist historians, whose research is highly questionable. Secondly, it will endeavour to synthesize the different perspectives of the Bethlen government that have emerged over the decades within Hungary and outside. Thirdly, it will seek to bring together a history of the government with ongoing research into other political parties, providing an opportunity to consider the legitimacy of the government, and its ability to withstand the opposition. Fourthly, and most importantly, Romsics himself wrote in 1999 that ‘about the government party unfortunately we have no comprehensive writings at our


\textsuperscript{52} Péter Sipos, A szociáldemokrata szakszervezetek története Magyarországon, Budapest, 1997 (hereafter Sipos, A szociáldemokrata szakszervezetek története);


\textsuperscript{54} Mária Ormos, Magyar mediavezér. Kozma Miklós, 2 vols, Budapest, 2000 (hereafter Ormos, Kozma Miklós).

\textsuperscript{55} Jenő Gergely, Gömbös Gyula, Budapest, 2001 (hereafter Gergely, Gömbös); See also Jenő Gergely, Gömbös Gyula: Vázlat egy politikai életrajzhoz, Budapest, 1999 (hereafter Gergely, Gömbös, Vázlat);

\textsuperscript{56} Zsuzsa Nagy, Két Háború Között, Ungvár, 1992 (hereafter Nagy, Két Háború Között); Jenő Gergely and Pál Pritz, A trianoni Magyarország, Budapest, 1998 (hereafter Gergely and Pritz, A trianoni Magyarország); Mária Ormos, Magyarország a két világháború között, Debrecen, 1998 (hereafter Ormos, Magyarország a két világháború között); Romsics, Magyarország története a XX században. See also László Kontler, Millenium in Central Europe, Budapest, 1999, pp.325-386.
disposal'. Apart from Batkay’s and Romsics’s efforts, a careful examination of Bethlen’s government has yet to be undertaken. This thesis will seek to remedy that deficiency.

This does not mean, however, that a complete history of the Bethlen government can be provided here. This thesis will instead limit itself in three ways. It will confine itself to an analysis of the first years of Bethlen’s government, 1921-1925, generally regarded by historians as a distinct period in Bethlen’s government, which they term the ‘consolidation’. It will generally avoid both foreign policy and the wide swathe of social and economic legislation, except where it sheds light on the high politics of the government. Finally it will focus on six specific questions and then use these to draw out more general conclusions about the way that the government operated.

The first chapter analyses Bethlen’s relationship with the parties that initially supported his government. It considers the creation of the ‘Unified Party’, defining it as the reconstruction of the pre-1918 governing party, asks how far this was the product of Bethlen’s tactical skill, and assesses the price Bethlen paid for creating a powerful, ‘unified’ party. The second chapter examines the way Bethlen sought to normalize relations with the MSZDP, break its election boycott, and bring it back into the fold of parliamentary life prior to the 1922 elections. It asks why this took so long to achieve, and whether the agreement signed in December 1921 by the MSZDP and the government constituted a realistic basis for a rapprochement between the two parties. The third chapter analyses the 1922 elections, considering the franchise, the parties involved and the final result. It considers why Bethlen’s party won the elections and asks whether this victory should be regarded as reflective of the opinion of the electorate. The fourth chapter uses an analysis of the struggle between Bethlen and the right-radical wing of the party through 1922-1923 as a means of considering the extent to which the Unified Party was genuinely unified and controlled by Bethlen. The fifth chapter examines Bethlen’s attempt to expand the Unified Party

\[57 \text{Ignác Romsics, Magyarország története a XX. Században, p.625.}\]
organization in the 1922-1923 period. It asks whether his attempt to modernize and expand the Unified Party was successful, and why it failed to provide a greater role for the party within the government. The sixth chapter considers the government’s relations with the MSZDP in the 1922-1925 period. It asks why relations between the two sides began to deteriorate from 1922 onwards to the point that Bethlen was faced with a parliamentary boycott at the end of 1924. It also elucidates how and why Bethlen allowed this situation to come about and how he was able to crush the boycott without seriously affecting either the policies or the credibility of his government. The conclusion establishes some general points about the way the Bethlen government operated, based firmly on the issues raised and answers given in the previous six chapters.

It is our overall contention that previous interpretations of Bethlen’s policies have been too simplistic. This thesis argues that Bethlen did have an ideology which defined his political programme. This ideology was embodied in Bethlen’s efforts to reconstruct the pre-1918 political system constructed by Kálmán and István Tisza.

The core of this political system was the so-called ‘governing party’ which had been formed by Kálmán Tisza and which had, for long periods, governed Hungary, reaching its apogee under his son István Tisza. This governing party was constructed according to the ideology of the two Tiszas. This ideology was designed to appeal to the various groups and interests in Hungarian society necessary to create and maintain a governing party. The formal programme of the governing party was vague; László Péter writes that it ‘scraped together a few generalities and tokens of liberal reform-plans in order to hold together [its] liberal and not so liberal members’. Various currents of political thinking were able to find expression within the party and influence its policies; the official history of Hungary for the years 1890-1918 writes not about the governing party’s ideology but about ideas present in the governing party such as what it terms ‘noble liberalism [nemesi liberalizmus],

holding-the-line liberalism [állagőrző liberalizmus], nationalism [nacionalizmus], new conservatism [újkonzervatizmus], and right-wing radicalism [jobboldali radikalizmus]. Nevertheless, there were limits to the inclusive and flexible nature of the governing party's ideology. Any advocates of radical change were excluded from the party, such as socialists, extreme anti-Semites, and opponents of the 1867 Ausgleich.

Bethlen sought to reconstruct this political system in order to restore national unity and political, economic, and social stability. This is not altogether surprising. Bethlen had been before the war almost exclusively concerned with Transylvanian affairs. Following the collapse of the monarchy he had had little time to work out a grand, new, political vision for his country. Furthermore, few domestic commentators expected the Trianon settlement or the constitutional impasse to last for long. The presumed need was therefore for temporary solutions to temporary problems, which resulted in a further disincentive to serious consideration of how a new Hungary should be governed. Bethlen, therefore, opted to continue following the Tisza model of advocating an ideology capable of incorporating the important interests in Hungarian society.

To achieve this Bethlen set out to create a new governing party, to construct an electoral franchise that ensured his party would secure a parliamentary majority, to isolate and expel elements within the party that threatened its cohesion, and to outmanoeuvre the opposition parties. Bethlen's ideology was underpinned by his ability to focus on these key objectives, thus allowing him to make the necessary

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60 See Andras Gergely, Zoltan Szasz, Kiegyezes utan, Budapest, 1978, pp.66-71;
tactical compromises and changes to ensure their realization and the reconstruction of key elements of the pre-1918 political system.
A Note on Sources

It is now necessary to make a few comments about the primary source material utilized in writing this thesis. Where possible I have used the collections of published documents. In particular the three volumes edited by Dezső Nemes\(^1\) and the volume of documents published by Miklós Szinai and László Szűcs,\(^2\) which are primarily related to high politics. Of secondary value, although occasionally useful, are the published documents on Miklós Horthy,\(^3\) and those relating to the socialist opposition,\(^4\) internal repression,\(^5\) the army,\(^6\) and Budapest.\(^7\) One needs, however, to be acutely aware that on top of the usual problems with source selection and editing, the Marxist historians who published these collections were following an ideological agenda. These are certainly not comprehensive collections; they contain only a tiny fraction of the relevant documents to be found in the various archives, and the selection of documents is in many cases telling.

The focus of my archival research was the Hungarian National Archives in Budapest where the central government documents are held. The collection there has suffered from changes in its somewhat random cataloguing system and a dispersal of some documents to other archives, although this has now been reversed. Furthermore


\(^2\) Miklós Szinai and László Szűcs, *Bethlen István titkos iratai*, Budapest, 1972 (hereafter Szinai and Szűcs, *Titkos iratai*).

\(^3\) Miklós Szinai and László Szűcs, *Horthy Miklós titkos iratai*, Budapest, 1962 (hereafter Szinai and Szűcs, *Horthy Miklós Titkos iratai*).

\(^4\) (eds.) Imre Matyásné, Magda Mándi, Ágnes Szabó, *Dokumentumok a magyar forradalmi munkásmozgalom történetéből 1919-1929*, Budapest, 1964 (hereafter *Dokumentumok a magyar forradalmi munkásmozgalom történetéből 1919-1929*).


\(^7\) (ed.) József Szekeres, *Források Budapest Történetéhez 1919-1945*, 4 vols, Budapest, 1972 (hereafter *Források Budapest Történetéhez*).
during World War II, and a later fire in the archives, a large number of files were destroyed. Nevertheless a number of important fonds have survived. I utilized K.468, the private papers of Bethlen, primarily from his time as prime minister, K.26 consisting of documents from the prime minister’s office, K.27, the cabinet minutes, K.64 containing foreign ministry documents, K.148/149, which contain surviving documents from the interior ministry and K.808, formerly held at the Politikai Történeti és Szakszervezeti Archívum, (Archive of Political History and the Trade Unions, at Alkotmány utca 2, Budapest), - fond 654.4, which contains material from the social-political department of the prime minister’s office. I also used P.4, a collection of documents relating to Gyula Andrássy, including his wife’s diary; a small part of K.35, which contains documents relating to Gyula Gömbös, and K.429, the substantial body of documents compiled by Miklós Kozma. Although other historians, such as Batkay, have made heavy use of the Kozma papers, they still provide fresh insights into the inner workings of the government and the Unified Party.

I also visited the local archives in Baranya, Fehér, Pest, and Vas counties to find copies of correspondence between the foispáns and central government that are missing from the national archives and to examine how particular functions were carried out at the local level. I also used the archives of the Archive of Political History and the Trade Unions which contain a large amount of material on the MSZDP including meetings of minutes, memorandums, conference reports etc. I also came across the occasional relevant document in the archives of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the National Széchényi Library.

However, while there is certainly a large amount of documentary evidence in the archives, there are also large gaps that can only be filled by relying on alternative source material. There is little surviving material relating to any of the parties except

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8 This set of documents was formerly stored at the Politikai Történeti és Szakszervezeti Archívum (Archive of Political History and the Trade Unions, at Alkotmány utca. 2, Budapest, hereafter PTSA).

9 I have not made use of the documents relating to the regent, Miklós Horthy, as Macartney writes that ‘he did not seek to intervene in details of policy at all, except, indeed, in those relating to public defence’. See Macartney, October 15th, i, p51.
the MSZDP. As regards disagreements between government figures, these were rarely, if ever, discussed in official government correspondence. Also the Bethlen government operated to some extent informally. The surviving documents make frequent references to earlier meetings and discussions, of which it is likely no formal records were ever made. Such gaps can, however, in part be filled by using contemporary newspapers which are a valuable source of information.

The respected Pesti Napló, Pesti Hírlap, Magyarság and the Social Democratic Party newspaper Népszava have, however, been used extensively by other historians. I have therefore relied on the Budapesti Hírlap, which prospered from its close links with the government while still retaining its independence and detachment; Az Újság, which was liberal and legitimist; Új Barázda, an official Smallholder Party newspaper although generally conservative in outlook; Az Est, which had close links with the left-wing of the Smallholder Party as well as the left-wing opposition parties, and Szózat which was the leading publication of the right-radical wing of the government party.

I have also employed the official publications of the time. In this category are included the collections of parliamentary laws,10 government decrees,11 semi-official parliamentary almanacs, which provide information on all MPs,12 the records of parliament, (where the speech has not been recorded in the newspapers),13 the published speeches of Bethlen14 and various official pamphlets.15 I have also occasionally found useful various diaries and memoirs, particularly those by General Kálmán Shvoy who occupied a senior position in the army;16 Father Zadravec who

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10 (ed.) Gyula Terffy, Corpus Jurus Hungarici, Magyar törvénytár, Budapest (hereafter Magyar törvénytár)
11 Magyarországi rendeletektára, Budapest.
13 Records of parliament (hereafter Nemzetgyűlési Napló).
14 Bethlen István Gróf beszédei és írásai, 2 vols, Budapest, 1933 (hereafter Bethlen István Gróf beszédei).
15 Contained in the library of the PTSA.
had close links with senior government figures;\textsuperscript{17} Tibor Zsitvay, who was deputy speaker of parliament from 1922,\textsuperscript{18} and Pál Prónay, who was a leading right-radical.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{17} (ed.) György Borsányi, \textit{Pater Zadravecztitkos naplója}, Budapest, 1967 (hereafter \textit{Pater Zadravecztitkos naplója})

\textsuperscript{18} (ed.) Péter Sipos, \textit{Magyarország 1921-1941, Zsitvay Tibor emlekiratai}, Budapest, 1999 (hereafter \textit{Zsitvay Tibor emlekiratai}).

\textsuperscript{19} (eds.) Agnes Szabó, Ervin Pamlényi, \textit{A határban a halál kaszál. Fejezetek Prónay Pál feljegyzéseiből}, Budapest, 1963.
Chapter 1 - The Formation of the Unified Party

Introduction

The collapse of the Habsburg monarchy in October 1918 was succeeded by the dismemberment of Hungary, economic, social, and political upheaval. The short-lived republic headed by the ‘red count’ Mihály Károlyi, was succeeded by the Bolshevik Räterepublik led by Béla Kun. After ninety days the utterly incompetent Bolshevik dictatorship collapsed under the advance of the Romanian army, which briefly occupied Budapest, and the ‘counter-revolutionary’ forces led Admiral Miklós Horthy based in Szeged. Even after Horthy’s forces regained control of the country political chaos continued. Atrocities were carried out against those suspected of collaborating with the Bolsheviks and a succession of governments failed to end the severe economic crisis. In such circumstances it is not surprising that many Hungarians conservatives began to view the pre-1918 period as a golden age. For them the reconstruction of Hungary necessarily entailed the reconstruction of elements of the pre-1918 system. Such thinking was embodied in the first law passed by the reconvened parliament in 1920 which abolished all prior legislation passed after October 1918. The election of a regent, Miklós Horthy, on 1 March 1920, was also perceived as a (temporary) substitute to fill the void left by the abdication of the House of Habsburg. Hopes of introducing a ‘stable’ electoral franchise and restoring the upper house of parliament also fitted into this desire to recreate the old political system.

For Bethlen, however, the key cause of the prolonged crisis was a lack of national unity, which found expression in the mass of competing parties and factions which had sprung up after the collapse of the monarchy. This lack of unity was contrasted with the period from 1867 until 1918 when politics was dominated by the governing party of the two Tiszas. Bethlen regarded this ‘governing party’ as having

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1 Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, p.67.
been the guarantor of the political stability that had allowed Hungary to flourish. The recreation of a unifying, dominant political party therefore became the primary goal for Bethlen and his supporters.

While Bethlen did not openly declare his intention to recreate the pre-1918 governing party, he did seek to replicate four key elements of the Tiszas' party in his new 'unified' party. First and foremost the pre-1918 governing party included every strand of 'acceptable' conservative/nationalist opinion, excluding only those (such as the radical '48-ers') who appeared to threaten political stability. Secondly, it used judicious appointments and its powers of patronage to secure control of the administration. It then used the power of the administration to influence the electoral process, the press, and restrict public opposition to the government. Thirdly, it was dominated by a single figure, first Kálmán and then István Tisza. Kálmán Tisza was nicknamed 'the general' while his party's MPs were dismissed as 'mamelukes'; while Gabor Vermes writes of István Tisza’s supporters that their 'devotion [to him] approximated that of a religious sect'. Fourthly, the governing party regarded itself as the guarantor and expression of the national interest rather than as merely another political party. It was prepared to use its power to pass measures, regardless of their controversial nature, which it regarded as being to the benefit of the nation. These would be the same four factors that Bethlen sought to incorporate into a new political party.

It is, however, important to note that Bethlen’s intention to recreate the governing party of the two Tiszas did not necessarily entail an intention to perpetuate their ideology. Although Bethlen would later pay tribute to István Tisza’s policies, at least initially Bethlen kept his distance from the Tisza legacy, which was still associated by many people with reactionary politics and a failure to protect Hungary’s national interests. In 1919 he turned down the offer of the leadership of the remnants

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3 On the ‘Tisza system’ and the pre-1918 governing party see Magyarország története, 1848-1890, (ed.) Endre Kovacs, 2 vols, ii, 1219-1222 and Janos, The Politics of Backwardness, pp.96-101. See also Vermes, Tisza; Ferenc Pölökei, Tisza István, Budapest, 1985;
4 Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, pp.84-87; Janos, The Politics of Backwardness, p.211.
of Tisza’s old party, and as prime minister he declared in April 1921 that ‘we cannot continue politics where István Tisza had left off’. Indeed, although Bethlen and Tisza had enjoyed cordial relations and mutual respect, Bethlen had sat in opposition to Tisza’s party from 1903 onwards.

Bethlen’s determination to recreate the Tisza party model is demonstrated by his political manoeuvring in early 1919. In a series of meetings and letters to leading political figures he outlined his intention to create a new, unifying, and dominant party composed of what he termed the ‘better elements’ of Tisza’s old party. This included leading Protestants and the factions led by such figures as Albert Apponyi, Gyula Andrássy and János Zichy. While Apponyi and Andrássy declined to join for personal reasons, they gave their blessing to the venture. An opening congress was then held on 19 February 1919.

In a letter to Andrássy Bethlen made clear his intention to follow the Tisza party model. The new party was to be ‘positioned on a national basis rather than representing the interests of classes, denominations or occupations’, providing unity and bringing in the ‘governmental forces which have not joined the other present formations’. These values were solidly conservative and nationalist, opposing both the class politics of socialism and the sectarianism of religious disputes. On the key question of the future of the monarchy, which had provoked fierce debate, Bethlen was also noticeably silent; it was not his intention to prevent any branch of Hungarian conservatism from being able to join. A key element of the Tisza party model - the incorporation of all the acceptable strands of conservatism in order to reflect and dictate the national interest - was clearly at the forefront of Bethlen’s thinking.

While the new party would collapse within a few weeks, overtaken by the events of the Bolshevik revolution, with Bethlen being forced to flee to Vienna, he

6 Romsics, István Bethlen, pp.31, 71.
8 Hungarian National Archive, Department P (hereafter OLP), 4 (The Diary of Countess Gyula Andrásy), 330.
had still demonstrated that his primary objective was the recreation of the Tisza governing party.

This chapter will therefore focus on Bethlen’s efforts to construct such a party, which he termed an Egységes Párt (Unified Party). It will begin by considering the factors that placed him at the forefront of Hungarian politics and the weaknesses of the various parties that prevented them from dominating the parliament. It will also examine how Bethlen’s unsuccessful attempts to form such a party in 1919 and 1920 altered his understanding of how such a result could be achieved. It will then proceed to examine how after his appointment as prime minister in April 1921 he sought to overcome entrenched opposition from the existing parties to his proposal for party unification. It will argue that by the autumn of 1921 he was beginning to gain the support of moderates conservatives from all the parliamentary parties and factions, but that the fighting that resulted from Charles IV’s unsuccessful attempt to regain his throne in October 1921 forced Bethlen to once again change his tactics. It will then demonstrate how through a series of political manoeuvres, he cemented his support among the majority of the parliament and succeeded in creating a new, Unified Party.

Factors in Bethlen’s Favour

In spite of his failure to create a new, governing party in early 1919 Bethlen’s position was strengthened by a number of factors. First, as Romsics puts it, ‘it was in these weeks that Bethlen began in reality to shoulder the leadership of the counter-revolution’. His leadership credentials were further enhanced by becoming head of the Anti-Bolshevik Committee (ABC) in Vienna, established by the émigrés to coordinate opposition to the Räterrepublik. While the eventual move against the Bolsheviks came from Szeged, the ABC continued to be regarded as the basis for restoring stability to Hungary. By remaining in Vienna Bethlen also distanced himself

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from the excesses of the counter-revolutionary 'white terror', even negotiating with the future regent, Horthy, to ensure the preservation of a modicum of law and order.

Secondly, Bethlen's failure to win a parliamentary seat until August 1920, kept him outside the parliament and served to disassociate him from responsibility for failing to solve the continuing government crisis. It also prevented him from having to take a stand on the questions dividing the parties, and therefore enabled him to appear a possible supporter of all the major political parties. His few public pronouncements of this period were in themselves exercises in obscuring any political platform upon which he was prepared to form a government. Even his calls for political unity appeared to confirm his stature as someone who stood above politics. Such calls were unlikely to be viewed with hostility by the parties so long as they believed that they would form the driving force in any new Unified Party. As the contemporary commentator Miksa Fenyö recognized, Bethlen was a politician who lacked a party-political power base and therefore appeared to have no wish and no ability to impose a different set of policies on the parties.10

Thirdly, where he did choose to express a more critical position, as in his denunciation of impractical demands for a new military campaign, he marked himself out as a moderate concerned with the 'politics of the possible'.11 In this way he earned the respect of the large number of politicians who privately recognized the realism of Bethlen's public statements. He was also on firm ground with this particular question, for his nationalist credentials as one of the leading conservatives and fiercest defenders of the rights of the Transylvanian Hungarians were already firmly established. Such criticism as he did receive from the extreme right served only to enhance his liberal credentials, and his speeches even received favourable coverage in the official Social Democratic Party newspaper.12

The fourth reason why Bethlen was able to strengthen his position in the 1919-1920 period is that he enjoyed a degree of popular respect for his practical

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10 Pesti Napló, 30 July, 1926.
11 Romics, István Bethlen, pp.127-128.
12 Ibid., p.133.
contribution to solving the problems currently besetting Hungary. This was due to his work in the ministry for refugees, his demand for compensation for those who had been driven from their homes, and his role in the Hungarian delegation to the peace negotiations. In particular these activities earned him the support of the refugees from the lost territories who trusted him to defend their interests and strive for territorial revision. He strengthened these links and expectations by being ‘president, or honorary president, of numerous revisionist organizations’. These refugees also played a prominent role in the parliament comprising seventy-nine MPs and stood to benefit from a dominant governing party able to concentrate on securing revision rather than concentrating on internal political disputes.

The fifth reason why Bethlen’s position strengthened is that he cultivated the respect and friendship of a number of leading political figures. He was on particularly good terms with Horthy on account of their mutual conservatism, Bethlen’s strong support for Horthy’s regency, and, possibly, their shared concerns about the danger of the Habsburg Charles IV being restored to the throne. This close relationship was demonstrated by the prominent role Bethlen played, under Horthy’s patronage, in the discussions that led to the appointment of the Huszár government in November 1919. Romsics even thinks that Horthy was hoping to nominate Bethlen as prime minister in March 1920, but lacked the opportunity.

Bethlen also had good relations with the nationalist MOVE organization and its leader Gyula Gömbös through their joint work in Vienna, and they had supported his attempt to form a party in 1919. He was also a member of several important secret societies, including the elite Etelközi Szövetség, (EKSZ), (Etelköz Association), which played an important role in the political process. Through these

13 István Mocsy, The Effects of World War I: The Uprooted, p.171.
14 Ibid., pp.172-173.
15 Ibid. p.128 They were also linked by the marriage of Horthy’s brother to a member of the Bethlen family. Miklós Szinia, ‘Bethlen és az ellenforradalmi rendszerek’, Valóság, 1972/1, p.14.
16 Pölöskesi, Horthy és hatalmi rendszere, pp.45-48. Romsics even suggests that Horthy wished to appoint him as prime minister at this time but Bethlen declined because he did not want to ‘shoulder the odium of accepting the imminent peace treaty’. Romsics, Ellenforradalom és konzolidáció, p.89.
17 Gergely, Gömbös, pp.22,40.
18 Mocsy, The Effects of World War I: The Uprooted, p.160.
groups he strengthened his relations with the factions led by Gömbös, Károly Wolff and Bishop Ottokár Prohászka.\textsuperscript{19} Furthermore, he had a degree of support, albeit rather small, from the so-called ‘dissident’ faction of twenty-two MPs, which had been formed in April 1920 with a call for the creation of a Unified Party.\textsuperscript{20} As well as sharing Bethlen’s ideal of recreating the Tiszas’ governing party, a number of them such as Teleki and Klebelsberg had earlier joined Bethlen’s party and would continue to be among his strongest supporters. Although this grouping was not strong enough to form a viable alternative to the two main parties, it could provide the nucleus for a broader party.

These factors strengthened Bethlen’s position. Had he once again tried to form an independent Unified Party he might have stood a better chance then in 1919. Bethlen was, however, astute enough to realize that to ensure a Unified Party was created, his conception of how to achieve this would have to adjust to the political changes which had occurred since 1919.

The Major Parties

The biggest change in the political landscape had occurred with the 1920 parliamentary elections. These elections produced two powerful parties, the Keresztény Kisgazda és Földmüves Párt, (Smallholder Party), (Christian Smallholders’ and Landworkers’ Party), and the Keresztény Nemzeti Egyesülés Pártja, (KNEP), (Party of Christian National Union). Neither of these parties was either willing or able to form a government and fully apply their political programmes.

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\textsuperscript{19} Ibid. p.159.
The KNEP was in reality a coalition of various different factions, which had come together primarily to secure political representation.\textsuperscript{21} The party was broadly legitimist; it argued that according to the Pragmatic Sanction of 1723, which was still on the statute books, Charles IV of the house of Habsburg was the constitutional, and thus legitimate, king of Hungary, irrespective of his abdication in 1918. The KNEP did, however, also include a faction opposed to a continuation of Habsburg rule, a Christian Socialist faction, itself divided into a number of smaller groups, and an extreme monarchist faction, opposed to the appointment of Horthy even as a temporary regent, and which demanded the immediate return of Charles IV. A part of this faction, led by István Friedrich, had already defected from the party.\textsuperscript{22}

The KNEP was also a minority party in the parliament with only fifty-nine seats. Even if it had been able to preserve internal unity it would have had to form an extremely broad coalition incorporating a range of smaller parties, independents and moderates from other parties. From a practical perspective it was easier for the party to play a key role in a broad coalition government than to form an unstable coalition or a minority government.

The Smallholder Party had the greatest possibility of forming a government. It was the largest party in the parliament with 107 of the 209 MPs having been elected on the party programme, although they had lost their absolute majority with the defection of the dissidents. The primary obstacle to a Smallholder government was not, however, parliamentary numbers (if necessary some form of coalition could have been cobbled together), but rather the fact that the party also suffered from deep internal divisions.\textsuperscript{23}

The Smallholder Party was generally free-elector; it demanded the abolition of the pragmatic sanction, arguing that Charles IV should not have the automatic right to

\textsuperscript{21} The major parties that formed the KNEP on October 25 1919 were the Keresztény Nemzeti Párt and the Keresztényszociális Gazdasági Párt but there were several other groups. See Batkay, Authoritarian Politics p.13.
\textsuperscript{22} Jenő Gergely, A keresztényszociálizmus Magyarországon, pp.155-156.
\textsuperscript{23} The party would be further weakened by the defection in February 1921 of Károly Rassay and seven other MPs to form the Független Kisgazda, Földmives és Polgári Párt (Independent Smallholder, Landworker and Citizens party).
be King of Hungary and that Hungary should elect its next king or even abolish the monarchy altogether. Apart from being free-elector, however, there was little that held the Smallholder Party together.

The party had initially been formed as a merger of two separate parties, led respectively by István Nagyatádi-Szabó and Gyula Rubinek, which had united primarily to secure electoral victory. Moreover, both of these parties were themselves divided into several factions. The liberal wing of the party, descended from Nagyatádi-Szabó’s old party, had forty-three MPs, was in favour of progressive reform, not overtly anti-Semitic, and placed great emphasis on land reform. It included a group of eight to ten radical left-wing free-electors who often worked closely with the liberal opposition in parliament.

The conservative wing also had forty-three MPs, and placed a general primacy on the end of requisitioning and the reestablishment of internal free trade. Within this were three groups: an anti-liberal group of twenty-three MPs which was prepared to compromise with the KNEP, a group of ten MPs close to Rubinek that was strongly free-elector, and a group of ten MPs led by Gömbös that represented right-radical values. While calling themselves supporters of Nagyatádi-Szabó, they were clearly on the extreme right of the party.²⁴

Some historians have argued that Rubinek, and the conservative wing of the party, was in control of the party. The distribution of MPs, however, suggests that power was shared within the party, while, as regards formal posts, Nagyatádi-Szabó was party leader, [pártvezér], and Rubinek only honorary president, [tiszteletbeli elnök]. However, the very fact that questions remain over who controlled the party reinforces the impression that the party was deeply divided.²⁵

²⁴ Statistics on divisions within the Smallholder Party come from Sipos, A kisgazdapárt fejlődése, pp.420-425. Romsics provides slightly different numbers but follows the general breakdown of the party into the groupings outlined above see Romsics, Ellenforradalom és konszolidáció, p.163.
²⁵ For arguments that the Rubinek wing actually controlled the party see Molnár, Magyarország története, ii, pp.369-370 and Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, p.15. For information on positions within the party see Nemes, Az ellenforradalom története Magyarországon, p.437.
These divisions were compounded by the remarkably undisciplined manner in which the party conducted itself. In many ways the party continued to operate along pre-war lines. In this sense, even the word party is somewhat misleading, and the idea of a ‘club’ is more accurate. It was run by a cumbersome four-member presidency with two representatives from each wing of the party. At the main premises in Budapest, members would attend meetings several times a week if they happened to be in the city. There appears to have been no quorum on the numbers required to make a decision, and the reports of numbers voting sometimes appear to suggest that less than half the MPs were actually present when a decision was made. Occasionally, party policy had to be revised when more MPs returned to the capital. Normally, the leadership committee with representatives of each of the factions would discuss policy prior to the meeting. It was, however, not until 1921 that MPs could actually be punished for voting against the party leadership.

If the party had formed the government it would have been hostage to each of the factions within the party. In particular, Nagyatádi-Szabó’s supporters were aware that they could always be outvoted by a combination of the KNEP, dissidents and conservative Smallholders, and attacked by a press that was eighty to ninety percent legitimist. It was also easier to blame the need for compromise on the requirement of co-operation than run the risk of forming a government that was unable to satisfy the expectations of the party’s supporters.

The inability of these two parties to form a government led to Bethlen subtly changing his conception of how a governing party could be produced. Whereas the Tiszas’ governing party attracted much of the support necessary to dominate the political environment precisely because it appeared to be the party most likely to achieve such domination, Bethlen’s party in early 1919 had had no such advantage. Therefore rather than seeking to challenge the existing parties Bethlen now sought to

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26 Sipos, A Kisgazdapárt fejlődése, p.420.
28 Sipos, A Kisgazdapárt fejlődése, p.421.
29 Hungarian National Archive, department K (hereafter OLK), 429, 2, 25
merge them into a new party, which would then be able to provide political stability and national unity. This objective was at least theoretically feasible as both parties expressed their support for the principle of national unity through party unification.\(^{30}\)

As Gusztáv Gratz perceptively points out this also became a means by which the more extreme tendencies of the parties could be moderated by their influence upon each other.\(^{31}\)

Bethlen did not have long to wait to put his growing reputation and his new strategy to the test.

The Continuation of Coalition Government

Both parties may also have opted for a coalition government to strengthen the authority of parliament. With memories of revolution and counter-revolution still fresh, rumours of a planned coup in June 1920 led to joint party meetings to express united support for constitutional government.\(^{32}\) Nemes argues that, faced with this danger, the Smallholders were prepared to give up the idea of an independent administration, and he points to the party statement of 13 June 1920 which accepted the need for continuing coalition government.\(^{33}\)

Both the KNEP and the Smallholders had previously agreed to a coalition government with a prime minister drawn from the KNEP. However, the second part of the parliamentary elections held in June 1920 in the area east of the Tisza recently evacuated by the Romanian army resulted in the KNEP becoming the junior party in the coalition, and on 26 June the Simonyi-Semadam government resigned. Negotiations immediately began as to who would form the next government.\(^{34}\)

\(^{30}\) On the initial discussions between the parties concerning the formation of a Unified Party, see Mészáros, 'A Simonyi-Semadam kormány megalakulása'.

\(^{31}\) Gratz, A forradalmak kora, pp.330-331. This move away from challenging the existing parties and instead co-opting them into a new party may also have been encouraged by the fact that a number of his old supporters had already joined other parties and his failure to win a seat in parliament in June 1920. See Romsics, István Bethlen, pp.127-128.

\(^{32}\) Nemes, Az ellenforradalom története, p.250.

\(^{33}\) Ibid. p.251

\(^{34}\) The Simonyi-Semadam government actually carried on work while negotiations on its replacement were taking place.
Initially, both parties wished to continue co-operation and expressed support for the candidacy of an independent figure such as Bethlen. Although a small group of Smallholders were pushing the party to seize the government, they were outvoted and the search continued for a solution acceptable to both the major parties.\(^\text{35}\)

There were, however, a number of obstacles to agreement. The KNEP demanded that the government maintain its monopoly on internal agricultural trade, a policy opposed by the Smallholders who responded by calling for a Smallholder prime minister and eight posts in a new cabinet. There was also growing opposition within the KNEP to anything that compromised the independence of the party. The leadership committee of the Christian Socialist trade unions demanded on 30 June that the party retain its independence, a move clearly aimed at preventing any formation of a Unified Party.\(^\text{36}\) Discussions now focused on appointing a candidate from one of the parties, but the favoured Smallholder, Rubinek, weakened his candidature by issuing a joint statement with one of the leaders of the KNEP István Haller calling for the preservation of genuine coalition government. On 6 July the Smallholders reaffirmed their support for such a solution, an outcome ensured by the liberal wing of the party’s ‘half-hearted’ support for Rubinek’s candidature.\(^\text{37}\) The opportunity for Bethlen to make a second attempt to impose his programme on Hungarian politics had arrived.

Bethlen’s Second Attempt to Form a Unified Party

The exact reasons why Horthy now nominated Bethlen to form a government remain unclear. We can, however, presume that the continuing squabbling between the parties ensured that an independent politician was the most feasible solution. As

\(^\text{35}\) For this section, see Budapesti Hírlap, 22-27 June and 3-8 July, 1920.
noted above Bethlen had no affiliations to any party - he was not even a MP. Furthermore he had grown in prominence and popularity since early 1919 and had good links with important political figures including Horthy himself. It is not, therefore, surprising that Bethlen was chosen by Horthy on 7 July 1920 to form the government. Bethlen immediately moved to identify his interests with those of Horthy by demanding that the regent should have the right to dissolve the parliament. He also demanded that the parties back his programme. It swiftly became clear that he intended this to mean not just formal support for his government but also the creation of a unified governing party.

Although both parties initially publicly rejected this idea of a Unified Party (with the Smallholders instead inviting Bethlen to join them after his appointment), the conservative wing of the Smallholders, the dissidents, the Prohászka faction in the KNEP, and possibly the regent, were all working for precisely this objective.\(^{38}\) There was also an awareness of the potential damage to the country from a continuing power vacuum. Thus there was a strong incentive to finding a swift solution to the crisis-clearly a factor that eased Bethlen’s negotiations. As the liberal Az Újság newspaper argued, any government was better than nothing at all.\(^{39}\)

By 9 July agreement had been reached on the need for a Unified Party with the leadership committee to be filled by one representative per ten MPs of a particular party. The parties also agreed to remove from discussion the question of the King’s restoration and to grant Horthy the power of dissolution on the grounds that it was not ‘pressing’ [aktuális].\(^ {40}\) Negotiations continued on the extent of party unification and had even reached the point where a name for the new party was being considered.

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\(^{37}\) Romsics, Gróf Bethlen István politikai palyája, p.238.

\(^{38}\) Nemes, Az ellenforradalom története, pp.251,270; Gergely, Gömbös, pp.89-91. Gergely suggests that Gömbös may have inspired the idea of party unification; Nemes on the other hand says Gömbös led the calls in early June for the Smallholders to take control of government. Newspaper reports of Gömbös’s speeches in this period however contradict Nemes’s assertion. See for example Az Újság, 1 July, 1920.

\(^{39}\) Az Újság, 9 July, 1920.

\(^{40}\) Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, p.20; Budapesti Hírlap, 10 July, 1920.
Progress was, however, disturbed by a group of liberal Smallholders who forced through a resolution that the regent could dissolve parliament only after a land reform had been passed. This threatened to force Bethlen into the unpleasant position of having to choose between the interests of the regent or the parties. Demonstrating however, a flexibility that was to become a characteristic of his political approach by 12 July he had, nevertheless, succeeded in producing a joint party programme that offered something to all concerned.

This programme did grant Horthy the right of dissolution but new elections were then required within three months and parliament had to be recalled six weeks later. Furthermore, he could only exercise this right after the outstanding question of electoral, land and tax reform had been resolved. Parliamentary authority was also upheld by the demand that law and order be guaranteed and the army placed under civilian (parliamentary) authority. The programme also called for tax reform, a solution to the ‘workers question’, housing for refugees, a reduction in the civil service, and a review of criminal, industrial and trade law. As regards the KNEP’s demands for Christian legislation, this did not extend to the Numerus Clausus idea of imposing limits on the numbers of Jews attending universities. The most that could be agreed on was a review of post-1914 residence permits and the expulsion of undesirables, both points being almost certainly aimed at unassimilated Jews, and the return of the Catholic Church to the autonomous status granted it under Law III of 1848. Legislation was also promised on legal rights for the minorities.

The vagueness and compromise evident throughout the programme was most apparent in the way it dealt with the most controversial issues. Both the question of

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41 Liberal Smallholders were also pressing for a guarantee that other social reforms would be passed before any parliamentary dissolution but they were defeated in an internal party vote. Budapesti Hirlap, 11 July, 1920.
42 The Numerus Clausus was the name given to Law XXV of 1920 which was introduced by the Teleki government, limiting the number of Jews in four universities in Budapest to the percentage of Jews in the total population. See Magyar törvénnytár, 1920, pp.145-146 and Gergely Egressy, ‘A Statistic Overview of the Hungarian Numerus Clausus Law of 1920: A Historical Necessity or the First Step Toward the Holocaust?’ East European Quarterly, xxxiv, 2000/4.
43 Details of the programme come from Budapesti Hirlap, 13 July, 1920 and Romsics, István Bethlen, pp.129-130.
the king and the dispute over when requisitioning should cease and free internal trade resume were simply left to be discussed at a later date. As for the land reform it was agreed that the final proposal should be a combination of Nagyatádi-Szabó’s proposal and the more moderate version prepared by Rubinek.

Romsics is probably right when he writes that ‘Bethlen attached no particular significance to this programme [as it was] general enough to allow varied interpretations’. The programme was also attacked by those in the KNEP who felt it failed to go far enough in dealing with church and workers questions, while some Smallholders saw it as aimed solely at preventing radical reform. Nevertheless it was a remarkable testament to Bethlen’s skill that he was able to produce some form of policy consensus. Bethlen now had the theoretical support of 180 MPs on the basis of an agreed political programme. The following day the new government party held its first meeting.

This original basis of co-operation had been to appeal to the different sections of the parliament and also to ensure their support for the whole of Bethlen’s programme. However, Bethlen also needed reliable ministers to draft the appropriate legislation to ensure actual policy could be shaped to suit his objectives. He decided, therefore, to disregard the practice of allowing the parties to choose the ministers in charge of most departments, which would have limited his appointments to only the finance, defence and foreign ministers. Instead he chose to nominate his favoured candidates for the key posts of ministers for agriculture, religion and the interior; a move that involved removing Nagyatádi-Szabó from his position at agriculture in favour of Rubinek, and removing a KNEP leader Haller from his position at the ministry for religion in favour of the dissident Pál Teleki. Arguments also arose over Bethlen’s nominee for the interior ministry with both his first and second choices being rejected by the parties.

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44 Romsics, István Bethlen, p.130.
45 Budapesti Hírlap, 13 July, 1920.
47 Gratz, A forradalmak kora, p.328
Perhaps surprisingly, considering how much effort he had invested into forming the framework for his government, Bethlen made no further concessions, handed in his resignation, and nominated his friend and close supporter Teleki as his replacement. The episode as a whole had, however, brought the realization of Bethlen's ambitions closer. He had demonstrated that the possibility of forming a Unified Party remained feasible. The majority of the MPs had shown a willingness to compromise on their specific agendas. Additionally, the party which Bethlen had assembled in his bid to form a government maintained a semblance of unity until February 1921 when it finally broke up into its respective factions. Furthermore, rather than attempting to struggle on with a parliament which would continuously undermine his authority, Bethlen had maintained his personal reputation and dignity by standing on the sidelines and waiting for the parties to recognize the logic of his arguments.

The temporary nature of his fall from office was confirmed not only by foreign observers' expectation of Bethlen's swift return to power but also Teleki's eagerness to see Bethlen continuing to play a role in government. Although Bethlen declined the offer, clearly wishing to disassociate himself from the government, the very fact that it had been made demonstrated the close relationship between the two men and strengthened the notion that Bethlen remained the real power behind the scenes.

This second attempt by Bethlen to form a Unified Party enables us to draw some conclusions about the feasibility at this time of such an objective. The speed with which Bethlen had turned the governing coalition into a new 'party' should not necessarily be taken as an indication of close links between the existing parties. As the above discussion of the parties indicates, neither was capable of governing independently. Some form of governing coalition was always likely to re-emerge. The

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48 It is suggestive of Bethlen's expectation that he would not be the next Prime minister that he took pains to stress that he had not been formally nominated by Horthy with forming a cabinet, but had simply been entrusted with that task, although the difference was unclear to contemporary observers see Budapesti Hirlap, 8 July, 1920.
49 Romsics, István Bethlen, p.131.
fact that it was now classed as a ‘party’ complete with a policy programme does not indicate any sizeable step towards the goal of full unification. Disputes continued on a number of questions, ensuring that policy objectives were exceptionally vague or simply left unmentioned. Also the Smallholders and the KNEP retained their separate organizations and their claims to particular ministries and cabinet posts even though Bethlen had turned this into a resigning issue.

Bethlen was, therefore, again required to change his conception of how a truly united party could be created. The level of opposition he encountered demonstrated that the formation of such a party would be a long, drawn-out process. It could not be achieved as a precondition before he accepted the premiership. Instead Bethlen realized he needed to accept the premiership first and then use his authority to achieve party unification. Until this could happen he had to wait while Teleki struggled to bring some form of stability to the parliament.

The Teleki Government

The Teleki premiership also benefited Bethlen by serving as an apparent rebuke to those who had put their own interests above the aspiration for national unity. The veneer of inter-party cooperation and coalition government swiftly gave way to continuous squabbling and a legislative impasse. Although the land reform legislation and the Numerus Clausus were passed into law, the parliament swiftly became bogged down in the debates on the ratification of the peace treaty. Furthermore both parties were growing embittered over the question of the king. The legitimists pressed for the swift restoration of Charles IV and the free-electors responding by calling for his immediate dethronement.

Although Teleki was able to reject both demands, the situation was clearly getting worse. By the end of January the parties were again holding separate meetings, the rival party newspapers were involved in mud-slinging, and the Smallholders were attempting to compensate for the fact that Nagyatádi-Szabó was
embroiled in scandal by demanding increased representation in cabinet and a free-elector government programme. With Teleki losing his grip on the parliament and desperately trying to hand in his resignation it was only a matter of time before he was replaced.

Meanwhile Bethlen was carefully developing his authority and preparing for a third attempt to form a Unified Party. He had finally obtained a parliamentary seat, in the constituency of Hódmezővásárhely on 26 September 1920, conveniently late enough to miss the debates on the Numerus Clausus. He enhanced his above-party status by sitting as an independent and confining himself to commenting on foreign policy from his seat on the foreign affairs committee.

He had also been astute in his handling of the question of the restoration of the king avoiding offence even when he had been forced to put forward an opinion. During campaigning for election he declared his support for a 'national kingdom'. This was approved of by the extreme free-elector newspaper Szőzat for its rejection of the Pragmatic Sanction and by legitimists who saw it as simply a formula for returning the king to the throne. This determination to appeal to both sides was confirmed in February when he stated that he was 'neither a “carlista” nor a free-elector'. Even though he chose to remain seated along with other legitimists on 1 April 1921 when the oath to Horthy took place, his emphasis on arguing that the question should be delayed enabled both parties to continue to view him as holding their position.

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50 Ibid., pp.104-105.
51 Romics, István Bethlen, p.135.
52 Kardos, Légitimizmus, p.49.
53 Romics, István Bethlen, p.138-140. Others were also seeking to take the heat out of the question with Tomcsányi writing to all föispáns on April 1 1921 that they should try and prevent local assemblies from discussing the question. See Pest County Archive, (hereafter PML) IV, 401a, 17, 1921.
The Formation of the Bethlen Government

Bethlen was right to be patient in waiting for another chance to assume the premiership. Teleki was increasingly unhappy as prime minister of an almost unworkable government. He was also suspected by the Smallholders of being implicitly a legitimist. When Charles IV made an unsuccessful coup attempt at Easter, Teleki was implicated in the whole affair and the attacks upon him by the free-elector Smallholders made his position untenable and Horthy accepted his resignation, nominating Bethlen as the new prime minister on 14 April 1921.54

Bethlen moved swiftly to seize the opportunity and presented his list of ministers the following day. He had learnt from his earlier mistakes. The previous June he had first negotiated for party unity and then sought to discuss who would be the ministers. This time he abandoned for the time being his plans for party unity and simply sought to form an acceptable cabinet, wisely recognizing that any alternative strategy would continue to keep him confined to the backbenches.

Teleki’s administration had won one clear concession from the parties. They had accepted an independent finance minister when the government had been reformed in November, although Ferenc Pölöskei’s claim that Lóránt Hegedüs’s authority was due to the parties lack of ‘financial expertise and sense of reality’ is probably too cynical.55 It is more likely that neither party was able or willing to take responsibility for a solution to the economic crisis. The finance ministry thus became another area regarded as the prerogative of the prime minister. This was, however, still a long way from Bethlen’s goal of completely breaking the individual parties control of particular ministries.

As well as keeping Hegedüs as minister of finance and Sándor Belitska as minister of defence Bethlen also brought in other non-party figures to the cabinet.

54 Teleki had happened to be in Szombathely when Charles IV arrived there on Easter Saturday. Such coincidences and Teleki’s refusal to denounce the coup attempt were enough to provoke the suspicions of the free-electors. See Pölöskei, Horthy és hatalmi rendszere, pp.150-152.
55 Pölöskei, Hungary After Two Revolutions, p.106.
Both parties disliked the appointment of Miklós Bánffy as foreign minister, distrusting his views on the question of the king. The Smallholders were also concerned about the appointment of Bethlen’s school friend Gedeon Ráday to the key post of interior minister, fearing that he would obstruct their plans for administrative reform. Bethlen, however, cleverly turned this argument on its head by suggesting that only an above-party figure could force through the administrative reforms that the Smallholders were demanding. In return he appointed Nagyatádi-Szabó as minister of agriculture, kept another Smallholder János Mayer in charge of requisitioning, and gave the conservative Smallholder Pál Tomcsányi the justice ministry. Also in his cabinet were József Vass and Lajos Hegyeshalmay of the KNEP who were strong supporters of the cause of a Unified Party.

Having formed a workable, if not yet ideal, cabinet, Bethlen now set out to strengthen his links with the parties. This, however, proved to be an extremely difficult task. Both parties had their own agendas which frequently clashed with Bethlen’s own programme and his attempt to cajole them into forming a Unified Party.

Relations with the Smallholders

The Smallholders relationship with Bethlen was punctuated by a series of squabbles, each one resolved through negotiation, compromise, and all the political acumen Bethlen could muster. Initially, however, it appeared that both sides would work together relatively harmoniously.

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56 Boroviczény, A király és a kormányzó, p.142. For the Smallholders Bánffy’s appointment was an improvement on the previous holder of the post, Gusztáv Gratz, who had been a staunch legitimist. Bánffy contributed to the Smallholder’s perception that he would represent their interests by implying that he would soon be joining the Smallholder Party. See Új Barázdá, 15 April, 1921.
57 Both Ráday and Bánffy were nominally members of the Magyar Királyság Pártja but lacked seats in parliament and were, most importantly, independent of the two main parties.
58 Nemes, Iratok, ii, p.129.
59 Both had joined with Teleki in breaking from the governing coalition on 4 February 1921 to try to form a new Unified Party. See Nemes, Az ellenfordalom története, p.436.
At his first cabinet meeting Bethlen demanded that his ministers focus on the
tasks of the government not their respective parties but he also declared his intention
to fulfil a primary Smallholder demand of ending requisitioning and restoring internal
free trade,\(^{60}\) repeating this point to the party on 21 April.\(^{61}\) He also used his speeches
to calm Smallholder anxieties. Three days after his appointment he visited the
Smallholder caucus to proclaim that ‘I do not feel myself to be an outsider in this
party because with my body and soul I am drawn to this party’.\(^{62}\) He continued this
praise in his opening speech to the parliament when he described the Smallholders as
‘the backbone of the nation’.\(^{63}\)

The Smallholder response was all he could have wished for. Nagyatádi-Szabó
sought to lower his party’s expectations stating that ‘it is not possible to honour every
group’s wishes’,\(^{64}\) and the official Smallholder paper Új Barázd also contributed to
the warm atmosphere, writing of Bethlen’s long involvement in the agrarian
movement and his ‘love of the village people’.\(^{65}\) The party also supported the
government’s funding and control of the Magyar Távirati Iroda, (MTI), (Hungarian
News Agency), with Új Barázd describing critics of the government’s actions in this
area as ‘destructive’.\(^{66}\) By the end of April the Smallholders received further
confirmation of the government’s agrarian leanings when requisitioning was ended.

Such cooperation, however, served only as a prelude before the first disputes
broke out between Bethlen and the Smallholders. The Smallholders had a long held
belief in the need for bureaucratic reform, regarding an administration primarily
appointed by the central government as a potential limitation on further reform and
also expecting to prosper from having elected officials. They were, however,
concerned that the new interior minister, Ráday, would not operate in their interest
The government sought to allay these concerns with Ráday promising to show his

\(^{60}\) Nemes, Iratok, ii, p.129.
\(^{61}\) OLK, 429, 2, 57.
\(^{62}\) Új Barázd, 19 April, 1921.
\(^{63}\) Bethlen István Gróf beszédei, i, p.158.
\(^{64}\) Budapesti Hírlap, 16 April, 1921.
\(^{65}\) Új Barázd, 15 April, 1921.
\(^{66}\) Új Barázd 28 April, 29 May, 1921.
work to the Smallholders who were also pleased to see the KNEP’s control of certain areas being weakened by the resignation of several leading legitimists, including two föispáns, after Charles IV’s Easter coup attempt. The primary challenge to the Smallholders’ authority within the administration was, however, no longer the KNEP. It was the government which now declared its intention to appoint new föispáns while promising that the Smallholders would continue to be suitably represented.

Marxist historians were correct in seeing Bethlen’s aim to have his own men as föispáns as an integral element of his conception of how his government and eventually a Unified Party should function. For Bethlen ensuring the administration operated as an extension of the government, and later the governing party, was a key part of recreating the Tisza system. There was, however, a second and subtler reason for this objective. Threats to replace Smallholder föispáns were also an effective counter to Smallholder hopes of administrative reform, providing the government with the initiative in this question and putting the Smallholders on the defensive. Additionally there was always the possibility of compromise and the ability to use the föispán question as a bargaining counter in negotiations. It is noticeable in this respect that in May the government rather than replacing several Smallholder föispáns simply expressed its intention to do so at some unspecified date.

Only in one case did the interior minister press the issue demanding that the föispán of Tolna county be replaced. At the 19 May cabinet meeting Bethlen suggested that the principle in this, and other, cases, should be that the föispán required the support of both the interior minister and the governing parties, an apparent compromise considering that it was traditionally the interior ministry’s prerogative to make such appointments. The Smallholders, however, suspected that such compromise candidates would replace not only the party’s föispán in Tolna

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67 Nemes, Iratok, ii, p.129.
68 Sipos, A kisgazdapárt struktúrája és a Bethleni konszolidáció kezdetei, pp.200-201.
69 Új Barátda, 20 April, 1921.
county but all the party's föispáns. One minister argued that 'in a similar manner every Smallholder föispán would be removed'. The question was therefore temporarily postponed with Ráday promising to consult first with the parties. When on 3 June the issue of the Tolna föispán's removal returned to the cabinet it was announced that ill health would be the primary reason for this action, something Nagyatádi-Szabó declared he would only accept if the new föispán came from his party. Again a decision was delayed while Bethlen promise further consultations with the Smallholder MPs from Tolna county.

Another potential area of conflict between the Smallholders and the government was the question of exceptional powers. At the end of April a fresh attack by liberal MPs on the government's use of internment and extra-judicial measures appeared likely to gain the support of a number of Smallholder MPs, and it appeared certain that Bethlen would be outvoted on this question. The government however moved swiftly to resolve the problem with Ráday admitting in a newspaper interview that 'there were and there are problems with internment procedures'. Then on 5 May the Cabinet agreed to a review of the government's exceptional powers, to some moderation of censorship, to limiting the use of extra-judicial investigations, and to ending the army's role in policing. Bethlen declared that 'gradually we need to return to the proper pre-war legal basis.' He demanded that each ministry provide reports within a week on which exceptional powers could be removed. As regards the internment camps, some inmates were released and an improvement in conditions was ordered with cases to be reviewed more quickly and frequently.

Bethlen also improved his standing among the Smallholders by over-ruling the interior minister's objections to a large agrarian meeting planned to take place in Budapest. He also accepted a number of Smallholder demands for changes to the taxation and export rights of agricultural products and finally abolished

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71 OLK, 27, Cabinet minutes (Minisztertanács jegyzőkönyvei, hereafter Mt.jkv), 19 May 1921.
72 OLK, 27, Mt. jkv, 3 June, 1921.
73 Az Újság, 30 April, 1921.
74 Sipos. 'A kisgazdapárt és a Bethlen kormány kezdeti tevékenysége', p.667.
75 Hungarian text is 'lassanként ra kell térnünk a haború előtti rendes törvények alapjára'.

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requisitioning. There were also expectations that the government would abolish censorship by the end of the summer of its own accord. The Smallholders were further reassured by Bethlen’s decision to maintain telegram censorship only on communications from abroad to Hungary, order an investigation into telephone tapping and disband the army internal surveillance units such as the infamous ‘T’ group.

This was enough of a package to overcome most of the doubts about the government’s reformist intentions. When Bethlen appeared at the Smallholder club on 11 May to promise future changes to internment it was clear that the majority of the party would vote with the government on this issue. On 18 May Rubinek strongly defended the principle of internment in a newspaper article and on 25 and 31 May the party expressed its official support for the government’s policy. This new position was confirmed by the rejection of Rezső Rupert’s proposal that the party should demand the immediate end of all the government’s exceptional powers.

The divide between the Smallholder Party and the government’s liberal critics was further demonstrated by Új Barázdá’s attacks on demands for further liberalization asking, ‘why are some people talking about unrestrained freedom when not even the survival of the nation is safe’? The party also reacted sharply to Rupert’s newspaper articles criticising right-wing extremism and his attacks on the government in parliament and he was forced out of the party. A sign of the renewed closeness between the Smallholders and the government was the full support they gave to Bethlen’s controversial claims that the socialist movement was secretly cooperating with the Bolshevik emigration.

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76 Sipos, Nagyatádi Szabó István emlékkönyv, p.173. See also OLK, 27 Mt.jkv, 5 May 1921 and Megfigyelés alatt, pp.78-79.
77 Új Barázdá, 18 May, 1921.
78 OLK, 27, Mt.jkv, 27 May 1921, 24 June 1921; Megfigyelés alatt, p.80.
79 Új Barázdá and Az Újság 12 May, 1921.
80 Sipos, 'A kisgazdapárt es a Bethlen kormány kezdeti tevékenysége’, p.672; Új Barázdá, 26 May, 1921; Budapesti Hírlap, 1 June, 1921.
81 Fehér, A Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt, p.171.
82 Új Barázdá, 3 June, 1921
83 Új Barázdá, 4 June, 1921
It was, however, the question of the land reform which was to prove the most difficult area on which to reach agreement. The Teleki government had already passed a land reform but it had been a compromise proposal. Furthermore even though the legislation had passed into law in December 1920 the committee which was to implement the reform had yet to be appointed when Bethlen assumed office. Many Smallholder MPs remained dissatisfied with the timidity of the land reform and the delays in implementation. They were also aware that Károly Rassay’s peasant party was strongly pressing for further land reform, and they were determined to preserve their reputation as the defender of agrarian interests. Bethlen, however, declared his opposition to such demands, strongly defending the previously agreed version as the maximum possible. He did, nevertheless, hold out the possibility of further reform but only when a more stable environment had been produced, seeking to both postpone the pressure for further reform and link Smallholder support of the government’s work to the land reform issue. Again he received support from within the party. An editorial in Új Barálda defended the government’s land reform as the best possible in the circumstances.

Pressure, however, continued for further reform. On 22 May 1921 the Smallholder Party organized a massive meeting in Budapest to support the reform, and the party claimed that 100,000 had attended. This meeting should not necessarily be perceived as anti-government since Bethlen was one of the keynote speakers. He was even praised by Nagyatádi-Szabó for being ‘the only count who took part in the celebration’. Relations did, however, suffer a setback on 24 May when Bethlen gave a speech attacking the Smallholders pressure for further reform, claiming it would set ‘class against class’. The Smallholders were, however, pleased that on the same day the membership of the organization established to implement the land reform, the

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84 Ferenc Pölöskesi argues that Rassay’s party was the most actively critical of the government’s policies, particularly on land reform, in this period. See Pölöskesi, Horthy és hatalmi rendszere, p.157.
85 Új Barálda, 18 May, 1921
86 Új Barálda, 24 May, 1921. József Sipos claims the actual number attending the meeting was 40-50,000. See Sipos, ‘A Kisgazdapárt és a Bethlen kormány kezdetei tevékenység’, p.675.
87 Bethlen István Gróf, Ministerelnöksége tizedik évfordulójára, p.52.
88 Nemes, Iratok, ii, p.31.
Országos Föld Bíróság, (OFB), (National Land Court), was finally named, even if only five of its thirty-six members were small landholders or agricultural labourers.  

In spite of these difficulties relations between the government and the conservative Smallholders appeared to be growing stronger. The Gömbös group was now supporting the government on every question and working towards the formation of a Unified Party while the Rubinek wing of the party from the end of May 1921 was voting with moderate KNEP MPs. The fulfilment of their primary demands for an end to requisitioning and the restoration of free trade ensured that the conservative Smallholder MPs no longer had a serious conflict of interest with the government and were prepared to support the Unified Party’s creation. The position of this group within the party had also been strengthened by the decision to give Rubinek formal charge of policy and tighten the authority of the party’s leadership committee. By 20 May the newspapers were reporting that the Smallholders had reached agreement with the government on all the important questions. It appeared as if the potential arguments between Bethlen and the Smallholders had been swiftly and easily resolved.

Bethlen now moved to cement his advantage, presuming that the conditions were ready for a Unified Party to be created. On 19 May the interior minister Ráday, almost certainly acting with Bethlen’s approval, made a speech calling for party unification. A few days later a group of leading non-party figures declared their full support for this objective. The newspapers were convinced that a real drive was under way to form a new party. Bethlen had, however, misjudged the situation. The

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89 Új Barátda, 25 May, 1921. Although Nagyatádi-Szabó nominated the members of the OFB, apart from the presidency, he was only allowed to choose designated ministry and institute members. See Magyar törvénytár, 1920, pp.230-272.
90 Sipos, A kisgazdapárt fejlődése, p.424.
92 Az Újság, 3 June, 1921 and Sipos, A kisgazdapárt fejlődése, p.424
93 Új Barátda, 13, 19 May, 1921. The committee was now empowered to be the first to consider all policy proposals and thus could delay internal party debate as they did regarding censorship on May 25. See Új Barátda, 26 May, 1921.
94 Új Barátda, 20 May, 1921.
95 Budapesti Hirlap, 20 May, 1921.
96 Az Újság, 25, 26 May, 1921.
resulting dispute even appeared for a while to threaten Bethlen’s position as prime minister.

Initial Smallholder anger at the idea of abandoning their independence was made worse by ill judged remarks by Ráday that all főispáns would, if required, be forced out of their positions. In response the Smallholders demanded that the party should have a state secretary appointed to the interior ministry to ensure it reflected the party’s interests. At the same time rumours began to circulate that Nagyatádi-Szabó was contemplating leading his supporters into opposition, although the party’s spokesmen swiftly denied this.  

On 5 June the party leadership marked out just how far Bethlen was from his objective. In a speech, described by the Az Újság newspaper as an ‘unfurling of the flag [zászlóbontás] against the Unified Party’, Nagyatádi-Szabó stated that the parties were fundamentally divided on the question of the king and declared that if his party obtained a majority in parliament they would assume the government. Even more worryingly for Bethlen, Rubinek also warned that the party could go into opposition, again raised the question of the főispáns, and stated that ‘it is not possible to speak about a Unified Party’. Then on 8 June the a Smallholder Party meeting in Budapest launched a sharp attack on Ráday and threatened to vote him out of office while on 9 June liberal Smallholders voted for an opposition amendment to ban duelling, therefore forcing the justice minister to offer his resignation.

Nagyatádi-Szabó rounded off this unhappy week for the government with another speech on 12 June. Again he attacked the government declaring that he would ‘happily’ go into opposition but was aware that this would make parliament ungovernable. He also dismissed the idea of a Unified Party saying, ‘we cannot be merged into another party’. The only consolation for the government was that both Tomcsányi and Gömbös stayed silent. Meyer stated that being in a coalition

97 Az Újság, 31 May, 4, 5 June, 1921.
98 Budapesti Hírlap, Új Barázda and Az Újság, 7 June, 1921.
99 Az Újság, 9 June, 1921.
100 Az Újság, 11 June, 1921.
101 Budapesti Hírlap, and Új Barázda, 14 June, 1921.
government required compromise, and Rubinek denied that his own speech indicated a lack of confidence in the interior ministry.\footnote{Budapesti Hirlap, 9, 12 June, 1921. Even Rubinek’s earlier speech could be interpreted as subtly moderating the Smallholder’s position as it called only for confidence in the new főispáns rather than that they actually become party members.}

Nagyatádi-Szabó’s decision to attack the government may have been influenced by the fact that both speeches were given at meetings aimed at forming local branches of the Földmunkások Országos Szövetsége, (FOSZ), (National Association of Landworkers), which would serve to broaden the basis of the party. Possibly so as to demonstrate to the locality that both the Society and the party were able and willing to represent their interests, he chose to overemphasise the continuing radicalism and independence of the party’s position. This also indicated the level of opposition to the government in the party and served as a warning of continued Smallholder dissatisfaction with the government’s policies.

The government’s response was to try to smooth over the differences. Ráday offered to meet Smallholder MPs over the fate of their főispáns,\footnote{Új Barázda, 9 June, 1921.} whom he declared were not ‘exponents [of government policy] but ‘colleagues’.\footnote{Sipos, ‘A kisgazdapárt és a Bethlen kormány kezdeti tevékenysége’, p.668.} Meanwhile Bethlen cleverly avoided exacerbating the problem by denying any knowledge of Nagyatádi-Szabó’s speech when asked for his reaction at a KNEP meeting. Instead he waited for the Smallholder leader to return to Budapest and then embarked on immediate discussions with him\footnote{Új Barázda, and Budapesti Hirlap, 14 June, 1921.} leading to a joint statement the following day that they were ‘able to come to agreement on every question of principle’.\footnote{Új Barázda, 15 June, 1921.}

This was expanded upon during a government visit to the Smallholder caucus on 15 June. On this occasion Hegedűs promised more financial reform, Ráday said he would ‘take into account the party’s wishes and opinions’ in his appointment of főispáns, and Bethlen suggested that any főispáns appointed should be invited to become party members. He also denied earlier rumours that he was preparing to dissolve parliament in the autumn and reassured the party that he would ‘not detract
from the general, secret, and district voting character of the electoral law'. Further concessions followed; a decree ordering the implementation of the land reform was issued on the same day. Later in the month the justice minister declared his willingness to reform the press law while Bethlen promised the Smallholders that they would get a state secretary in the interior ministry. The government also helped strengthen the Smallholders by defending the position of their főispán in Szatmár county against accusations that he was overly friendly to Romania.

The extreme legitimists also aided the improvement of Smallholder-government relations by beginning a fresh series of attacks on the legitimacy of the regime. The free-elector Smallholders were naturally reluctant to support these criticisms by continuing their own attacks on the government. Instead the Smallholder paper Új Barázda responded by redirecting its attack towards critics of the government. The party also made an important concession by agreeing that they would not vote against the government if the government stated that an issue should be regarded as a question of confidence. There was also agreement that those who broke this rule should be punished.

Although relations with the Smallholders had therefore been patched up, the events of the first half of the month had been a warning to Bethlen regarding his plans for a Unified Party. For a while the question of party unification simply dropped out of public debate but this in itself was a setback for the government. The longer the issue was overlooked the longer Bethlen would have to wait to fulfil his objective.

\[107\] Új Barázda, and Az Újság, 16 June, 1921 In effect the concession on főispáns was understood to be that the government would appoint főispáns favoured by a particular party in the counties where that party held the majority of the MPs, something that appealed to both the major parties - see Budapesti Hírlap 17 June, 1921.

\[108\] Az Újság, 17, 23 June, 1 July 1921.

\[109\] Budapesti Hírlap, 16 July, 1921. A harsher press law was also withdrawn due to parliamentary criticism. See Sipos, 'A Kisgazda párt struktúrája', p.221.

\[110\] Új Barázda, 10, 17 June, 1921.

\[111\] ÖLK, 27, Mtkv, 10 June 1921; Pölöskei, Horthy és hatalmi rendszere, p.156.
Land Reform

Even though the dispute over party unification had died down in June a new dispute arose concerning Smallholder aspirations for the application and extension of the land reform. It was becoming increasingly apparent that the redistribution provided by Law of 1920 would not fulfil even the limited expectations accompanying, and arising from, reform. The legislation, which relied on the principle of pre-purchase rather than direct confiscation, was littered with exemptions, and pressure continued to mount for a means of increasing the land available.

For Bethlen the only possible solution was a one-off tax on property. Nagyatád-Szabó had consistently opposed such a solution but Bethlen had rather cleverly prepared for this least-worst eventuality by forcing through the link between land reform and a capital levy at his first cabinet meeting. Such a method was clearly designed as an alternative to what Bethlen regarded as the unacceptable principle of confiscation but it was also aimed at raising revenue for the exchequer as the first draft indicated with its proposal to tax anyone possessing over one hold. The finance minister confirmed these twin objectives in a speech on 17 May 1921 when he declared that the land tax could solve both the financial and the land question. Facing a forecast budget deficit of 6.5 billion crowns, the government was eager to utilize any form of tax raising power. Moreover, the new tax seemed

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112 See Magyar törvénytár, 1920, pp.230-272 and C.A. Macartney, Hungary, 1934, pp.240-241. Land could be taken from property acquired between 28 July 1914 and date of passage of the law (7 December 1920). Properties belonging to certain classes of undertakings and properties of which the owner had been convicted of offences against the state or desertion could also be confiscated. The many exemptions included war-invalids, widows and orphans, properties acquired by near relatives and numerous categories of large estate such as monastic orders which maintained secondary schools, property acquired through the involvement of credit societies, 'and other similar holdings which support or maintain institutions of public interest'.


115 Budapesti Hírlap, 10 June, 1921. (1 hold equals 1.42 acres).

116 Budapesti Hírlap, 18 May, 1921.
likely to be accepted by the Smallholders as a price worth paying to increase the pace of land reform.\textsuperscript{117}

While the Smallholders had been manoeuvred into accepting the principle of the tax they were still prepared to offer considerable opposition to its exact provisions. At the beginning of July thirty-eight Smallholder MPs signed a petition warning that they would resign their seats rather than accept the first draft of the tax, and rumours began to circulate that Nagyatádi-Szabó would resign from the government if he did not obtain substantial concessions.\textsuperscript{118} Pressure on the government was increased by a joint meeting on 22 June of the Országos Magyar Gazdasági Egyesület, (OMGE), (National Hungarian Economic Union), of which Rubinek was president, and the FOSZ, which attacked the flat tax nature of the proposal and demanded a reduction of a third for small property owners. This received the support of the entire Smallholder Party although the left wing went even further, calling for a complete exemption for those owning less than 3 or 5 hold.\textsuperscript{119}

This opposition forced Hegedüs to introduce modified plans on 28 June 1921. He also offered the possibility of further compromise by stating that he would consider recommendations not only from the financial but also the agricultural committee, which was dominated by Smallholders.\textsuperscript{120} Bethlen on a visit to the Smallholder club reinforced expectations of a further compromise by accepting that negotiations between the government and the party should continue.\textsuperscript{121} This did not, however, prevent the Smallholders continuing to criticise Hegedüs’s proposal, and they put forward several alternative proposals based around the idea of tax levels being determined by a sliding scale.\textsuperscript{122}

\textsuperscript{117} Budapesti Hírlap, 22 June, 1921.
\textsuperscript{118} Budapesti Hírlap, 2, 15 July, 1921.
\textsuperscript{119} Sipos, A kisgazdapárt fejlődése, p.426.
\textsuperscript{120} Sipos, A kisgazdapárt fejlődése, p.427; ÓLK, 27, Mt.jkv, 24 June, 1921.
\textsuperscript{121} Új Barázda, 23 June, 1921 and 1 July, 1921.
\textsuperscript{122} Új Barázda 23 June, 1921 and 12, 14 July, 1921. Bálint Szijj’s plan envisioned a complete exemption for anyone owning less then 5 hold and then a five per-cent tax rate for those owning up to 50 hold. Gyula Rubinek proposed instead that the lowest tax band should be eight per-cent for those owning one to ten hold.
With Rubinek appointed by the party to lead negotiations with the government, and advocating a proposal that was the closest to the government’s offer, it comes as little surprise that his plan was accepted as the basis for negotiation by 16 July. Continuing Smallholder concerns were further alleviated by a concession of a two per-cent reduction in the starting tax rate for owners of one to five hold and acceptance of the principle of compulsory payment in land for large landholders. The government also responded to Smallholder concerns by asking Nagyatádi-Szabó to hold a conference to discuss ways of speeding up the land reform, and the party responded by approving the capital tax plan on 9 August 1921.

Once again the Smallholders were probably encouraged to compromise by an unwillingness to be overly critical of a government which was coming under renewed criticism from the extreme legitimists. They were also unwilling to support the liberal opposition’s attacks upon the tax and the agricultural policies of the government that their leaders had played a role in formulating. Furthermore part of the strength of their bargaining position stemmed from the implication that they would support the final version of the proposal and accept that it was always likely to be something of a compromise.

The tax rested upon a sliding scale based on the size and profitability of holdings. If the payment was in land then a separate scale was to be used which increased from six percent for those with one to five hold, to potentially twenty percent of the land for estates over 50,000 hold. Payment for all properties could either be in cash, government-issued bonds, or property. Although holdings over 1000 hold could be forced to pay in land, this would only occur if both the agricultural and

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123 Budapesti Hírlap, 10, 13, 16 July, 1921 and Új Barážda, 17 July, 1921. Rubinek’s success in these negotiations may also be indicative of the government’s tendency to favour the more conservative approach he represented but he was also an expert on land ownership having published some of the first research on the subject. Scott Eddie, ‘A földtitulajdoni címárak mint a gazdaságtörténeti kutatás forrásai’ in (ed.) Péter Hanák, Híd a századok felett, Pécs, 1997, pp.335-336.
124 One hold is roughly equivalent to 1.4 acres.
125 Új Barážda, 21 July, 1921.
126 OLK, 37, Mt.jkv, August 4, 1921.
127 Új Barážda, 11 August, 1921.
128 Az Ujság, 16 July, 1921.
finance ministers agreed to it.\textsuperscript{129} Although, therefore, the government had finally conceded the principle of confiscation, there was little likelihood that the finance minister would agree that land redistribution was more important than increasing revenue collection.

Although it was expected that this tax would lead to the redistribution of over 600,000 holds\textsuperscript{130} Romsics estimates that the total amount of land taken did not exceed 432,000 holds.\textsuperscript{131} Yet it also failed to generate the sums of money the government hoped to use to alleviate the budget crisis. There were a number of reasons for this.

The law itself, while seeking to extract the maximum possible (by for example rounding up fractions above half) undermined this objective by incorporating a number of exemptions.\textsuperscript{132} József Nagy argues that its effect was also limited by the complexity of the legislation which was mistrusted by the peasants who stood to benefit from it. He also argues that the whole process of determining the value of the land and how the tax was to be paid was a time consuming process, affected by spiralling inflation, deliberate obstruction, and perhaps a degree of corruption. In 1923 there were still districts where the whole process had yet to begin.\textsuperscript{133}

Furthermore the tax took into account the prosperity of land and excluded non-arable land, thus serving as a disincentive to increased efficiency and productivity. Against a long-term increase in the amount of land being brought under cultivation, the total area of fallow land actually increased between 1921 and 1923.\textsuperscript{134} Another reason for the lack of revenue raised may have been that landlords, unwilling to hand over land but unable to pay in cash, leased out their land to raise money.

\textsuperscript{129} Magyar Törvénytár, 1921, pp. 374-419.
\textsuperscript{130} Nagy, 'A Nagyatádi-fele földreform', p. 25.
\textsuperscript{131} Romsics, Ellenforradalom és konszolidáció, pp. 121-122.
\textsuperscript{132} There was a third reduction to wounded soldiers and widows with more than one child. Those possessing less than 5 hold were completely exempt as were state officials, churches, those who had obtained up to 3 hold through the 1920 land reform, and members of the Vitézi Order. See Magyar Törvénytár, 1921, pp. 374-419.
\textsuperscript{133} Nagy, 'A Nagyatádi-fele földreform', pp. 26-28.
\textsuperscript{134} Magyar Statisztikai Szemle, Budapest, 1923.
The statistics on land leasing in this period are incomplete and comparisons with earlier data are affected by the use of different definitions. For example, Joseph Held presents data that suggests there was a major increase in land leasing in the inter-war period. In 1900 32.1% of the estates of 100 to 1000 hold and 24.9% of the estates over 1000 hold were being leased out. By 1936 the amount of arable land being leased out by the large estates had increased to 47%. Unfortunately the second statistic is based on a different definition of large estates, (as exceeding 750 hold), and takes into account the quality of the land being leased. This makes a comparison with the statistics for 1900 unreliable.

Mihály Kerék also provides statistics on changes in land leasing for the years 1925 to 1935. In contrast to Held’s statistics, he suggests that land leasing actually fell in this period. In 1925 a total of 2,056,024 hold was being leased from estates over 100 hold but this had fallen to 1,806,503 hold by 1935, a decline of 12.1% whereas the total territory of these estates had decreased by only 3.7%. These statistics do not, however, apply to the years 1921 to 1925 when the effect of the capital levy would have been most pronounced. Also against the backdrop of a decline in lease holding, estates of less than 1000 hold actually increased the percentage of land being leased. Holdings of 100 to 500 holds increased their total land leased out by 32.5% between 1925 and 1935 while holdings between 500 and 1000 hold increased the amount leased out by 6.8%.

This suggests that the solution of leasing land to pay the capital levy was used, not by large estates which may have had access to money and favourable bank loans, but by smaller estates which were already impoverished by the post-war agricultural depression. The agricultural levy may therefore have served to modernize Hungarian agriculture by encouraging both land reform and land leasing. Certainly it lessened

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137 Kerék, A magyar földkérdés, p.226.
138 Ibid.
the immediate pressure for further land reform, particularly as the weaknesses of this particular legislation would not become apparent for some time.

Overall, however, the difficulties Bethlen experienced in forcing through the capital levy served as a reminder that the Smallholders remained difficult and unreliable partners. They had obstructed key parts of his programme and had rejected the idea of party unification. Bethlen’s relationship with the other major party, the KNEP, was not, however, a great deal smoother.

Relations with the Legitimists

Up to a point, the KNEP were more inclined to good relations with the government than were the Smallholders. The failure of Charles IV’s first coup attempt persuaded a large part of the party that the return of the king would have to be postponed. Bethlen’s argument that this question was temporarily impossible to solve because ‘consolidation is not complete, and the political situation abroad is not suitable’ therefore dovetailed with KNEP thinking and received a favourable response from leading party figures.139 The KNEP assumed that when the time came Bethlen would support the king’s return, and this was only reinforced by his eagerness to remind Andrássy of their common past in the Constitutional Party in 1917-1918.140 The sense that Bethlen was on their side also appeared to be confirmed by Bethlen’s difficulties with the Smallholders. His admiration for constitutional tradition was also apparent in his support for the formal trappings of monarchy, the restoration of the upper house, and his talk of the need to ‘connect with the great national traditions’.141

Bethlen’s advocacy of a Unified Party also appeared from a moderate KNEP perspective to be a possible means of isolating the extreme free-electors, driving them into opposition, and thus easing the way for the restoration of the monarchy. Unlike

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139 Kardos, Legitimizmus, p.56.
140 Pölöskei, Hungary After Two Revolutions, p.110.
141 Bethlen István Gróf beszédei, ii, p.155. Throughout the entire inter-war period Hungary remained officially a kingdom.
the Smallholder reaction to talk of party unification, the KNEP was strongly supportive of this objective. On 19 May the party stated that there was ‘no serious obstacle’ to the formation of a Unified Party. On 4 June Andrássy stated that he would support a Unified Party that did not require him to give up his Christian principles and the leading Christian Socialist Haller declared on 19 June that there were no differences of principle between the parties.

There were, however, concerns among the KNEP about Bethlen’s links with the right-radicals, who had established their extreme right-wing credentials in the counter-revolution and were strongly opposed to a Habsburg restoration. Among Bethlen’s first decisions as prime minister had been the appointment of Gömbös as state secretary in the interior ministry, a move that infuriated the legitimists. Threats by the KNEP to oppose the new government if the appointment went ahead forced Bethlen to declare he was ‘prepared to let Gömbös drop’. It was, however, Gömbös rather than Bethlen who actually solved the problem, offering his resignation in an open letter on 18 April 1921.

The whole episode served to increase the extreme legitimists’ distrust of the government and Bethlen compounded the problem by continuing to promote other right-radicals. Tibor Eckhardt, was put in charge of the prime minister’s press office and thus effectively became chief censor, while Kozma became head of the MTI.

All this did not, as we have seen, prevent the majority of the KNEP from establishing reasonably good relations with the government, but it did provide the government’s critics within the KNEP with further reasons to think that they could expect nothing from Bethlen’s premiership. Within days of Bethlen’s appointment as prime minister, a former interior minister, Ödön Beniczky, began a series of attacks...

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142 Budapesti Hírlap, 20 May, 1921.
143 Kardos, Legitimizmus, p.61.
145 Gergely, Gömbös, p.113.
146 Boroviczény, A király és a kormányzó, p.148.
147 Kardos, Legitimizmus, p.58.
148 Kozma’s ‘situation reports’ also frequently contained his own political advice to Bethlen and are contained in OLK, 429, 1-13. See also Szinai and Szücs, Titkos iratai, p.53.
on constitutional abuses committed by the government during Charles IV’s attempt to reclaim his throne at Easter 1921. He then broadened his assault to condemn the regime’s conduct during the so-called ‘white terror’ of 1919-1920. By May other KNEP members had joined the attack, specifically criticising the work of Eckhardt and Kozma within the government.

The vehemence of these attacks reached such a level that in July the KNEP speaker of the house, István Rakovszky, was forced to resign for failing to control the debate and the government supported his replacement by a Smallholder, Gaszton Gaál. This setback did not, however, undermine relations between the government and the moderate wing of the party as much as one might have expected. Indeed it can be argued that the crisis served as an inducement to both sides to ensure that such events would not be repeated. Furthermore, the fact that the entire parliament had united in condemning the personal attacks upon the regent further isolated the extreme legitimists who were also the strongest opponents within the KNEP of cross party co-operation and the idea of a Unified Party. Andrássy, for example, protested against Rakovszky’s forced resignation but still expressed his trust in the government.

Bethlen was also not prepared to allow the extreme legitimist attacks to obstruct continuing cross-party co-operation and a possible agreement. Although Kozma argued that the solution to the problem was to unite all those opposed to Charles IV’s return, Bethlen was unwilling to rely solely on the free-electors either to defend the government’s position or to establish a Unified Party.

It was Andrássy who made the first step towards a rapprochement, approaching Horthy on 4 August with a series of points for discussion including what

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151 Kardos, Legitimizmus, p.62. Zsuzsa Nagy offers a different explanation for Rakovszky’s resignation claiming it was triggered by attacks upon him by the extreme right. See Nagy, Bethlen liberális ellenzéke, p.44.
152 Ibid. p.61.
153 Budapesti Hirlap, 16 July, 1921.
154 OLK,429, 2, 72; Romsics, István Bethlen, p.162
means Horthy was prepared to use to bring the king back, how those who had committed atrocities in the counter-revolution could be punished, and foreign policy questions. Bethlen, Bánffy and another leading legitimist Gusztáv Gratz joined the discussions on 22 August. As a result, Bethlen promised to replace the virulently free-elector head of the press department, Tibor Eckhardt, and agreed to limitations on free-elector propaganda. He also gave a further concession by promising that one new governor in the areas of southern Hungary which were under Yugoslav occupation until October 1921 would come from the KNEP. Horthy also helped smooth relations by personally pledging to prevent any dethronement, to maintain close contact with the king, and to make the necessary preparations for his return. Romsics is almost certainly right to see this as indicating a change in Bethlen’s tactics and a return to his original idea of building a Unified Party around a core of KNEP conservatives, the dissidents and the conservative wing of the Smallholders.

Relations between the government and the KNEP nevertheless remained difficult. The Beniczky - Rakovszky faction continued to criticise the government, Eckhardt remained at his post, and the party’s hopes for the appointment of more supporters to the new bureaucratic positions in liberated Baranya county went unfulfilled. The legitimists were also dissatisfied with a letter Horthy sent to the King, declaring that the national interest had to be guaranteed before any restoration could be considered. Bethlen sought to tread a middle line criticising the letter while also advocating that it should still be sent, (on the grounds that another could always be written), but Countess Andrássy, and probably the other legitimists, viewed his approach as somewhat duplicitous. Although the KNEP declared on 5 September that ‘it must continue in every respect its support for the government’, the newspapers reported that a fresh assault on the foreign, finance and agricultural

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155 For details of the negotiations see OLP, 4, 330, 22, 30 August, 1921; Romsics, István Bethlen, pp.161-163; Kardos, Legitimizmus, pp.63-64; OLK, 27, Mt.jkv, 12 August, 1921.
156 Romsics, István Bethlen, p.172.
157 Budapesti Hírlap 14 August, 2 September, 1921
158 Zoltán Vas, Horthy, vagy a király, Budapest, 1971, pp.298-299.
159 OLP, 4, 330, 31 August, 1921.
ministers was planned.\(^{160}\) General dissatisfaction with the continuing economic crisis and a lack of results in foreign policy was, however, counterbalanced by a desire to bring the King back as quickly as possible.\(^{161}\)

Certain historians have concluded that since the government was seeking to come to agreement with the KNEP, it must have been turning against the Smallholder Party and not just its extreme free elector element.\(^{162}\) To prove this argument they point to a number of what they see as ‘attacks’ on the Smallholder Party.

Attacks on the Smallholders

On 22 August 1921 the Smallholders once again reiterated their demands for bureaucratic reform. This drew a sharp response from a meeting of local government officials on 25 August which declared bureaucratic reform to be an attack on Hungary’s ‘thousand year constitution’. The meeting strongly defended the government’s policies, and demanded an end to political disruption through the creation of a Unified Party. Such attacks were unlikely to have been made without government encouragement, a point emphasized by the fact that the leading speaker Iván Rakovszky was a strong supporter of Bethlen, having joined him in founding a party in 1919, and was later appointed interior minister in 1922. Indeed Bethlen warmly praised the meeting, though not its specific political agenda.\(^{163}\)

This is not, however, a clear indication of a break between Bethlen and the Smallholders. For one thing it can have come as no surprise that the administration was opposed to reform. Also the administration could in fact do little to block any measure the government was actually prepared to push through the parliament. It did demonstrate that the government had, in spite of opposition from the parties, succeeded in exerting its influence and authority over the administration. It is also

\(^{160}\) Budapesti Hirlap 6 September, 1921

\(^{161}\) Kardos, Legitimizmus, pp.66-67

\(^{162}\) For an example of this viewpoint see Szinai and Szücs, Titkos iratai, pp.14-21

\(^{163}\) Nemes, Iratok, ii, p.35; Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, pp.19-20; Budapesti Hirlap, 26 August, 1921.
clear that the administration’s support for the government meant that Bethlen would
be more reluctant than ever to undermine one of his bastions of support.\textsuperscript{164} However, the Smallholders were unwilling to exacerbate the problem. They limited their
reaction to criticising the meeting for attacking the sovereignty of parliament and
restating their demands for immediate reform.\textsuperscript{165}

Another example of worsening Smallholder-government relations used by
historians is Pallavicini’s attack in parliament on Nagyatádi-Szabó for his earlier co­
operation with the communists.\textsuperscript{166} The fact that he was one of the leading dissidents,
and was regarded as one of Bethlen’s closest supporters, has encouraged the view that
Bethlen was behind this particularly personal and therefore potentially highly disruptive attack. There is, however, no firm evidence to support this contention; nor is there any evidence to suggest that this seriously affected government-Smallholder
relations.

The strongest example, and one cited by many historians as being of such
importance that it permanently weakened the Smallholder Party, is the question of the
so-called ‘Esküdt scandal’.\textsuperscript{167} This concerned the role of Lajos Esküdt, Nagyatádi­
Szabó’s personal secretary, who was accused of the sale of agricultural export
licenses for personal profit. Allegations had initially surfaced during the Teleki administration but in August 1921 a full-scale investigation was launched involving
150 detectives and 250 witnesses. It is argued that the whole process was a concerted
effort to undermine Nagyatádi-Szabó, both through the eventual conviction of his
secretary and the uncovering of evidence directly implicating him in the scandal.\textsuperscript{168}

For Batkay these attacks backfired by provoking a hostile reaction, with
Nagyatádi-Szabó on 5 September in Kalocsa stating that ‘we will not allow ourselves

\textsuperscript{164} Szinai and Szűcs argue that the situation only resolved itself after the second coup but their
diagnosis of the earlier instabilities within the bureaucracy and the importance the government attached
to imposing its authority seems to me perceptive, see Szinai and Szűcs, Titkos iratai, p.16.

\textsuperscript{165} Uj Barázd, 1 September, 1921.

\textsuperscript{166} Szinai and Szűcs, Titkos iratai, p.20.

\textsuperscript{167} See for example Magyarország története, ii, p.443.

\textsuperscript{168} Szinai and Szűcs, Titkos iratai, p.20. It is worth however noting that the Smallholders themselves
did not make that allegation and indeed claimed the it was not a ‘political question’. See, for example,
Az Est, 11 September, 1921.
to be absorbed by anyone else'. On 14 September he responded to the allegations of corruption by threatening to name all those involved. This was also a warning to Bethlen, who was aware of rumours that the scandal involved a number of leading government figures and even his own son. Nevertheless it is worth noting that Nagyatádi-Szabó only remained in the government because his offer to resign on 12 September was rejected. Indeed his Kalocsa speech could be subject to various interpretations. Not only had he not ruled out the idea of a Unified Party, merely one particular form of unification, but he also blamed others for the failure to form the new party and even defended the government's tax record.

Nemes on the other hand argues that the Kalocsa speech was a cause, not a consequence, of Bethlen's renewed attack on the Smallholders. He claims that it is no coincidence that Esküdt was arrested one week after the Kalocsa speech. He also points to the replacement of Smallholder főispáns in Baranya and Zemplen counties as evidence that Bethlen was determined to intimidate Nagyatádi-Szabó into accepting party unification.

The idea, however, that relations between the Smallholders and the government had collapsed by late September is somewhat undermined by articles in Új Barázda calling for the formation of a Unified Party. Indeed the Smallholders continued negotiations with the government and by the end of September had made the important concession of being prepared to accept in theory the restoration of Charles IV, so long as his authority stemmed not from the pragmatic sanction but from the invitation of the Hungarian parliament.

A perceptive view of the Esküdt affair which should be applied to all of Bethlen's political manoeuvring over the summer is Ferenc Pölöskéi's argument that

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170 Ibid., p.27.
171 Shvoy Kálmán titkos naplója, Entry dated 17 September 1921.
172 Budapesti Hírlap, 13 September, 1921.
174 Ibid. p.36.
175 Új Barázda, 7, 21 October, 1921.
176 Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, p.120.
this was not an attack on the Smallholder Party as such, but rather a means of exploiting and increasing the internal divisions within the party. In short it was not an attack on the Smallholders but on the idea that the Smallholders would prosper from remaining independent. Bethlen’s objective seems to have been to maintain or develop good relations with the moderates in both the Smallholder Party and the KNEP while maintaining the threat that either of the parties could be driven into opposition if they were not prepared to offer some form of compromise.

Szinai and Szűcs’s thesis which argues that the two parties were motivated primarily by a fear that the other would form the nucleus of the next government, adds insight into Bethlen’s tactics of this period. By maintaining the impression that he was prepared, if necessary, to disregard either of the major parties Bethlen had skilfully strengthened his position vis-à-vis, the Smallholders and the KNEP. Instead of Bethlen being dependent on both parties to continue as prime minister, it was now the parties which believed that they were dependent on Bethlen to remain within the governing coalition.

Smallholder Divisions

Bethlen’s tactics had therefore produced an environment suitable for a compromise sufficient to allow moderates in both parties to believe the government was operating according to their principles. The restoration of Charles IV and the primacy of the Hungarian parliament could operate together. The Smallholders had been offered land reform and the resumption of free trade while the KNEP maintained a firm grip on the education ministry and the operation of the Numerus Clausus. Furthermore, Bethlen had appealed to reformists in both parties by demonstrating his flexibility on the issue of restoring the upper house and had allowed a small relaxation of censorship and other exceptional powers. He had also watched as both the

177 Pölösséki, Horthy és hatalmi rendszere, p.173.

178 Szinai and Szűcs, Titkos iratai, p.16.
Smallholders, (through the export scandal), and the ultra-legitimist wing of the KNEP, (through its attacks on the regent), gradually weakened their own positions. Recognizing the increasing momentum towards unification inter-party negotiations began to be conducted although they appear not to have made much progress.

The key question now was how much of the Smallholder Party would support a Unified Party. At the peak of the Esküdt scandal, Rubinek declared his support for a Unified Party and argued that the party must ‘offer a programme which does not lose momentum in its support of the government’. Even the resolution drafted by both sides of the party declaring support for Nagyatádi-Szabó was termed by the newspapers a ‘compromise’. The left of the party was, however, determined to seize the initiative from those who favoured unification. It reiterated the old demand that the party should nominate the interior minister in the cabinet, and argued that someone with more experience should replace the foreign minister Bánffy. Renewed hostility to the whole idea of party unification was demonstrated by Meyer who, in a speech on 26 September, declared that the Smallholders would only form a ‘Unified Party’ after they had secured a parliamentary majority at the next election.

Bethlen moved swiftly and ruthlessly to bolster his position among the conservative Smallholders. The day after Meyer’s speech he removed one of the obstacles to improved relations by accepting the resignation of his finance minister. Hegedüs had been criticized by both parties for failing to solve the economic crisis and had angered the Smallholders over his refusal to authorize emergency payments for unemployed labourers affected by an exceptionally bad harvest. Bethlen was also aided by the KNEP’s new programme which could have been drafted by the conservative Smallholders. It demanded further land, bureaucratic, electoral and

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179 Budapesti Hirlap, 28 September, 1921.
180 Budapesti Hirlap, 13, 15 September, 1921.
181 Az Est, 16 September, 1921.
182 Az Est, 21 September, 1921.
183 Budapesti Hirlap, 27 September, 1921.
workers' insurance reform and accepted that the question of the king could be removed from discussion.

The concern among liberal Smallholders that a Unified Party was about to be created was increased by open KNEP speculation that thirty to forty Smallholder MPs were preparing to join the new party. Attempting to pre-empt such an outcome they declared that supporters of a Unified Party should instead join the Smallholder Party. Rubinek, however, rejected the feasibility of this proposition, declaring in a newspaper interview that he expected a Unified Party to be in existence by November built not on a Smallholder basis but centred on the prime minister Bethlen.185

Pressure on Nagyatádi-Szabó also came from radical elements in the local Smallholder Party organization. An open letter from the branch of the party in Zala county appeared in the liberal Az Est newspaper on 4 October. While expressing its full confidence in the party leadership the letter went on to demand that the party should not come to agreement with the large landowners but rather 'with the working people'. The local branch in Borsod county also echoed this demand.186

Determined to mark out their position, supporters of Nagyatádi-Szabó on 6 October 1921 presented to a poorly attended party meeting, (of which Rubinek was the most noticeable absentee), a radical ten-point programme, demanding (amongst much else) urgent land reform, the restoration of all legal freedoms and a general secret ballot. The programme also brought the question of the king back to the centre of political debate by demanding the abolition of the pragmatic sanction. Even worse any future support for the government was made conditional upon the realization of this programme.187

The reaction to this programme was overwhelmingly critical. The conservative Budapesti Hírlap condemned what it called 'party demagoguery' and the KNEP stated that such a programme, if accepted by the government, would force the

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185 Budapesti Hírlap, 28, 29 September, 1921.
186 Karsai, A budai Sándor-palotában történt, p.89; Az Est, 4 October, 1921.
187 Budapesti Hírlap, 7 October, 1921.
KNEP into opposition. There was also open resistance within the party. On 11 October Rubinek, Tomcsányi and Károly Schandl held a meeting attended by twenty-five Smallholder MPs to organize opposition to the liberal Smallholders’ demands and drew up a substantially more restrained alternative programme. However, at a full party meeting the following day, a slightly moderated version of the original ten demands was passed by fifty-six votes to fourteen.

Bethlen as usual made no comment on these events when he returned to Budapest on 14 October. The divisions, however, within the Smallholder Party strengthened KNEP expectations that they themselves would form the basis of a new Unified Party along with Rubinek’s supporters and the dissident faction. Their expectations were given further force by news of Bethlen’s discussions with Andrássy and the conservative Smallholders. The legitimist Magyarság newspaper reported on 19 October that the KNEP had reached agreement with the government on all substantial questions.

The general expectation was that Bethlen would use a speech to be given in Pécs on 21 October to accept in principle the return of the king and declare the formation of a Unified Party. Even after the speech, however, there was still uncertainty over what had been agreed. Bethlen’s Smallholder supporters talked about the creation of a broad governing coalition, including the liberal wing of their party, while KNEP MPs declared that a Unified Party was now in existence.

The October Coup Attempt

It is one of the ironies of Hungarian history that the Pécs speech, which had been twice delayed for personal reasons, was finally given at the precise moment

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188 Budapesti Hírlap, 8 October, 1921.
189 Budapesti Hírlap, 12 October, 1921; Az Est, 13 October, 1921.
190 Sipos, A Kispárt struktúrája, p.227.
191 Kardos, Legitimizmus, p.69.
192 Budapesti Hírlap, 19 October, 1921; Pölöskei, Horthy és hatalmi rendszere, p.174.
193 Kardos, Legitimizmus, p.69.
194 Az Est, 23 October, 1921.
when the return of the king upset all calculations. Gathering military support in Sopron, Charles IV made his way by train to the outskirts of Budapest, where at Budaörs he was met by a hastily assembled group of students and right-radical organization members. Following a brief clash of arms, Charles IV surrendered, was arrested and expelled from Hungary. The whole episode severely undermined hopes of a negotiated restoration. Also the fact that Andrásy was at Dénesfa, about three miles from where the king arrived to begin his coup, and that the king appointed Andrásy and other legitimists to his cabinet resulted in the arrest of these KNEP’s leaders and the nullification of any prior agreement with Bethlen which they appeared to have betrayed. It mattered little that eyewitnesses recorded Andrásy’s astonishment at the king’s return, being there ostensibly only to attend a christening, nor that the king announced his cabinet before consulting with his appointees; denials of responsibility were only to be expected after the coup had failed.

Romsics is quite right to state that the imprisonment of leading legitimists and the dethronement of the king ensured that ‘the Christian, conservative and legitimist aristocrats would have nothing to do with a united party supporting Bethlen’. Nevertheless a large section of the KNEP sought to rebuild relations with the government, with Wolff condemning Charles IV’s actions and Apponyi seeking to distance himself from Andrásy. On 4 November 1921 the KNEP stated that it would ‘without exception continue to support the work of forming a Unified Party and the prime minister, Count Bethlen’. It demanded only the expansion of legal freedoms and guarantees of the rule of law as its conditions for joining a new Unified Party.

In return the government ensured that while the pragmatic sanction was annulled, removing the automatic right of a Habsburg to the Hungarian crown, the

195 Macartney, October 15th, i, p.42.
196 Kardos, Legitimizmus, pp.71-72.
197 Romsics, István Bethlen, p.173.
198 Kardos, Legitimizmus, pp.77-78.
199 Budapesti Hírlap, 5 November, 1921
200 Budapesti Hírlap, 10 November, 1921.
restoration of a Habsburg to the throne at some later point was not ruled out. Indeed Hungary officially remained a kingdom and the law simply stated that the question of the king was to be delayed to a ‘suitable time’. Beyond this, however, Bethlen offered little to the KNEP. Perhaps he overestimated the KNEP’s hostility to his government; alternatively he may have expected it to remain compliant. He instead focused on securing the full support of the Smallholders.

Continuing Problems with the Smallholders

Although the issue of the monarchy appeared to have been settled in the free-elector Smallholder’s favour, Bethlen continued to face substantial opposition to his plans for party unification. Admittedly the events of the coup had ‘produced a reaction immensely favourable to the government, and to Bethlen especially, on the part of the Smallholders’. Even the liberal wing of the party felt a new confidence in Bethlen. As Macartney eloquently puts it ‘so fixed was the belief among the Left of Central Europe that the cause of the Habsburg dynasty was identical with that of reaction and obscurantism in all their forms that they regarded anyone who stood up to the Habsburgs as being on their side’.

Bethlen nevertheless recognized that this in itself was not enough to guarantee the Smallholders’ complete support. He swiftly promised accelerated administrative, electoral, and land reform. While the conservative Smallholders accepted this, the majority of the party felt that they had the upper hand and offered only to postpone discussion on how to implement their earlier ten-point programme. They were expecting more prominence in the new cabinet and even contemplated the possibility

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201 Magyar Törvénytár, 1921, p.421.
202 Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, p.28.
203 Macartney, October 15th, i, p.42. One immediate consequence of the closer links between the government and the Smallholder Party was that several prominent associates of Bethlen including Kozma and Eckhardt, head of Bethlen’s press office, became party members. See Polőskei, Horthy és hatalmi rendszere, p.175.
204 Sipos, A Kisgazdapárt strukturája, pp.227-228; Budapesti Hírlap 27 October, 1921.
of a Smallholder prime minister if Bethlen was unable to retain the confidence of parliament when he reformed his government.

The situation was complicated by the question of whether Nagyatádi-Szabó would be included in the reformed cabinet as the KNEP was continuing to attack his role in the ‘Esküdt scandal’. 205 His supporters, in contrast, threatened to go into opposition if he was excluded. Bethlen’s initial confidence that a Unified Party would be formed before the reformation of his government soon gave way to threats that he would dissolve parliament if no progress could be made.

Smallholder Party disunity was also becoming increasingly apparent. On 18 November in an article in the Magyarország newspaper, Nagyatádi-Szabó again outlined his opposition to any merging of the parties and repeated his threat to go into opposition, while the semi-official Smallholder paper Agrár Posta attacked Bethlen’s tactics on the formation of a new party. Such comments, however, only served to demonstrate how isolated this position was. Meyer now publicly accepted that ‘there will be a Unified Party’ and Rubinek dismissed Nagyatádi-Szabó’s comments as containing nothing new. Even the Az Est newspaper wrote that a Unified Party was now certain, although it still insisted that ‘the Smallholders will be the backbone of the new party’. 206

With Bethlen now determined to press ahead with the new party’s formation and Nagyatádi-Szabó refusing to alter his position, even though he risked breaking apart his party, it was clear that one or the other would have to give way. 207 It was the Smallholder leader whose nerve broke first. At a party meeting on 23 November 1921, after a long debate, Nagyatádi-Szabó authorized the beginning of official discussions on the formation of a Unified Party. On 26 November Bethlen felt confident enough to visit the Smallholder club to repeat his call for unification,

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205 For the following section see Budapesti Hírlap, 4-20 November, 1921 and Az Est, 5, 10 November, 1921.
206 Az Est, 18 November, 1921.
207 For the following section see Budapesti Hírlap, 24,25,27,29 November, 1921.
something he was unlikely to have done unless assured of receiving a warm reception, as indeed turned out to be the case.

It remains unclear precisely why Nagyatádi-Szabó felt the need to give way at this time. In terms of those who spoke at the crucial 23 November meeting, most declared their opposition to a Unified Party. Even Tomcsányi, who had previously supported moves towards unification, declared himself unsure whether such a step was needed. Only Rubínek was clear in his demand for immediate negotiations. We do not even know if a vote was taken. Regardless of the motivating factors, the decision marked a real change in the political landscape. The question was no longer whether a Unified Party should be formed but how this should be brought about. At least in principle, the Smallholders were now committed to Bethlen’s long-cherished ideal.

On 28 November the two parties held a joint meeting to work out a Unified Party programme. The Smallholders also laid out a series of eight demands, repeating their earlier calls for the restoration of civil liberties, an accommodation with the socialist movement, solutions to the worker’s question and rising inflation, and swifter implementation of land, administrative, and electoral reform. This was in no sense a serious obstacle to unification, for it was already a step back from the ten-point programme of early October and even accepted the principle of limiting the number of women voters. Bethlen was happy to accept such demands and promised that the new party’s premises would remain the Smallholder club and all ministers would be required to join the Smallholder Party. Although the Smallholders were still demanding guarantees from the government, enough appeared to have been achieved to provide a realistic basis on which to build a Unified Party.

Renewed squabbling, however, again broke out between the parties. The KNEP was prepared to accept only that the new party president should be a Smallholder while the Smallholders again placed obstacles in the path of party

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208 The full programme is given in Bethlen István Gróf Ministerelnöksége tizedik évfordulójára, p.57; See also Az Újság, 29 November, 1921.
unification. They now demanded that anyone who wished to join the new party should adhere not only to the government programme but also to Smallholder principles. This requirement was approved at a party meeting on 29 November by a vote of twenty-four in favour to twenty-one against. This vote, far from providing the expected endorsement to unification, appeared to undermine its chances. Another motion, demanding that the party not abandon its independence was passed by twenty-five votes to eighteen. Nagyatádi-Szabó also raised the issue of cabinet appointments, claiming that the reason he would not be in the cabinet was due to his anger at the attacks which had been made on him.\(^\text{209}\)

The government response was to flex its muscles. Government sources criticized Nagyatádi-Szabó for presuming he had a guaranteed place in cabinet and he was duly replaced by the more centrist Meyer.\(^\text{210}\) A leading dissident Klebelsberg, rather than a Smallholder, was also appointed as interior minister, although the Smallholders were at least granted a state secretary position in the ministry. Bethlen’s explanation that he was not aware of their nominee for the post did little to appease Smallholder anger. The reformed cabinet also rewarded the conservative Smallholders by giving Schandl and, a few weeks’ later, Gömbös state secretary positions.

The Smallholders criticized the new cabinet but there was, however, little they could actually do. Although there was talk of voting against the government, the proposal was defeated at a party meeting.\(^\text{211}\) For the time being, however, talk of a Unified Party again diminished. Batkay focuses on Bethlen’s call for unification on 7 December, describing it as ‘official’, but such calls had been made before; in reality little had changed.\(^\text{212}\). The Smallholders continued to demand that any new party be

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\(^\text{209}\) Budapesti Hírlap, 30 November, 1921.
\(^\text{210}\) Budapesti Hírlap, 1 December, 1921.
\(^\text{211}\) Budapesti Hírlap, 4, 6, 7 December, 1921.
\(^\text{212}\) Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, p.29. It is unclear why Batkay focuses on this particular instance as Bethlen had called for the formation of a Unified Party in his Pécs speech of October 21 and on his visit to the Smallholder club on November 26.
built on their party structure and even the Rubinek wing declared that above all else party unity had to be maintained.\textsuperscript{213}

The chances of the two parties unifying were also diminished by the growing instability evident within the KNEP. Divisions began to emerge over the suitability of an imprisoned Andrásy continuing to lead the party. When Bethlen visited the KNEP caucus at the end of November 1921, some MPs refused to attend while others, including Ernszt, Huszár and Haller, gave him a warm reception.\textsuperscript{214} By Christmas, party divisions had grown so deep that there were rumours of an immediate break-up and Haller, formerly one of the strongest exponents of unification, began planning the reconstruction of a Christian Socialist party. When the newspapers reported on 30 December that Andrásy would leave the KNEP and go into opposition,\textsuperscript{215} confirmed by his speech to the KNEP on 4 January 1922, it became certain that the KNEP would collapse. The crisis within the KNEP also served to increase Smallholder confidence that they would be able to win the coming parliamentary elections and go on to form the next government.\textsuperscript{216}

Rapprochement with the Smallholders

It therefore comes as something of a surprise that at the end of December Nagyatádi-Szabó resumed negotiations with Bethlen on forming a Unified Party.\textsuperscript{217} To explain this we have to consider a number of factors. First, while Bethlen’s plans for party unification had run into problems, his personal popularity remained high. His resolute resistance to Charles IV and the recovery of the territory under temporary Yugoslav occupation, was followed by the success of the Sopron referendum, held on 14 December, which enabled Sopron to remain in Hungary even though the rest of the Burgenland was transferred to Austria.
Secondly, Bethlen had begun direct negotiations with the Social Democratic Party which were concluded by 23 December. As well as offering some specific concessions on the return of trade union property and the release of imprisoned socialists, Bethlen also agreed to end the government’s use of exceptional powers, thus also fulfilling a long-standing Smallholder demand. Another consequence of these negotiations was that they increased the likelihood that the MSZDP would end its boycott of parliament and participate in the forthcoming elections. Suddenly the Smallholders faced a new electoral threat that could potentially mobilize an increasingly impoverished electorate and challenge the conservative principles and political authority of both the government and the Smallholder Party. However, if the Smallholders could obtain Bethlen’s support they would be in a stronger position to resist the socialists’ attempts to attract their disaffected supporters.

The third reason why the Smallholder Party resumed negotiations with Bethlen was that Nagyatádi-Szabó’s own position remained fragile. The export scandal continued to provide his opponents with scope for extensive criticism, while the divisions in his own party remained just beneath the surface. There remained the possibility that a section of the party was prepared to break away if invited to do so by Bethlen. He may also have been influenced by indications that party support for unification was not confined to a faction of the parliamentary party. This is indicated by the letters Bethlen began to receive from December onwards from local Smallholder branches expressing strong support for the government and its policies. Although this was probably to some extent stage-managed (there was no indication of any dissenting opinions), this does not necessarily detract from the idea that there was broad support for Bethlen among the Smallholder grassroots.

The fourth reason was that Bethlen now acted to reassure the Smallholders that the land reform would be carried through. At a cabinet meeting on 22 December he agreed that the OFB, established to administer the land reform, should begin work
and publish timetables for land reform and the imposition of the capital levy. He also threw in an additional concession, agreeing that all landless soldiers should receive three hold of land after completing their military service.\(^{221}\)

The final, and perhaps most important, reason why the Smallholders resumed negotiations with Bethlen was that he was now prepared to rely on the Smallholders to form a Unified Party. As late as 17 December Bethlen was still seeking to prevent the question of the king from exerting too much influence on politics. He wrote to the főispán of Baranya county that ‘we must bring calm to the press in this question’\(^{222}\). He also offered privately to secure Andrássy’s release from prison if in return he would abstain from politics, and thus calm the atmosphere while the case against those suspected of involvement in Charles IV’s October coup attempt continued.\(^{223}\) Bethlen was, however, encouraged to change his tactics by Nagyatádi-Szabó’s clarification of the rules for joining the Smallholder Party. He now declared that adherence to ‘Smallholder principles’ meant simply support for the dethronement of the King.\(^{224}\)

In a speech to the Smallholder caucus on 5 January Bethlen responded by returning the question of the king to the centre of political debate. He began by launching an all-out attack on the legitimists, condemning their disloyalty and declaring that ‘we stand in the middle of a great struggle that will decide the fate of the nation’s future’. His conclusion was clearly spelt out: in this struggle Bethlen stood with the Smallholders. He described them as the rock on which he wished to build the Unified Party and declared his wish to join the party. His speech received a tremendous reception from the party and a famous handshake from Nagyatádi-Szabó. Bálint Szijj, a prominent spokesman for the liberal wing of the party, even declared

\(^{221}\) OLK, 27, Mt.jkv, 22 December, 1921.
\(^{222}\) Báranya County Archive, IV, 401a, 59, 1921.
\(^{223}\) OLP, 4, 330, 23 December, 1921.
\(^{224}\) Az Est, 4 January, 1922.
that Bethlen’s speech had led him to abandon his plans to leave the party that very evening.\textsuperscript{225}

Some historians such as Batkay have suggested that Bethlen’s decision to announce at the Smallholder club that he wished to join the party received such a positive reception because his audience was ‘flattered by the fulsome praise showered upon them’.\textsuperscript{226} This is overly cynical. Bethlen had given a number of speeches at the Smallholder club without receiving the same reception. The difference on this occasion was that Bethlen re-focused attention on the legitimist - free elector dispute. He was able therefore to obscure the differences that remained and to appear to be in complete agreement with the Smallholders. As Romsics puts it ‘the Smallholders had apparently won a great deal and lost absolutely nothing’.\textsuperscript{227}

Final disputes

Bethlen’s attack on the legitimists was certainly a brilliant move. At the same time the price of using the question of the king to facilitate his entry into the Smallholder Party meant the abandonment of the old ideal of unifying both the leading parties, as the furious KNEP reaction to his speech demonstrated.\textsuperscript{228} Initially the expectation had been that a large part of the KNEP would follow the government into any new party formation. At the end of November 1921 it was reported that forty of its MPs were supporting Bethlen,\textsuperscript{229} but Bethlen’s decision to align himself with the free electors gave renewed vigour to KNEP critics of the government. By mid-January only twenty to twenty-five KNEP MPs were still prepared to enter a Unified

\textsuperscript{225} Karsai, \textit{A budai Sándor-palotában történt}, pp.83-88. See also \textit{Az Újság}, 6 January, 1922.
\textsuperscript{226} Batkay, \textit{Authoritarian Politics}, p.29. Ferenc Pölöskei also implies that Bethlen’s success on January 5 also stemmed from the ‘unusually ceremonious ‘ nature of his visit to the Smallholder club. See Pölöskei, \textit{Horthy és hatalmi rendszere}, p.179.
\textsuperscript{227} Romsics, \textit{Ellenforradalom és konszolidáció}, p.166.
\textsuperscript{228} Az Újság, 7 January, 1921.
\textsuperscript{229} Budapesti Hirlap, 26 November, 1921.
Party, although another part of the KNEP was prepared to support Bethlen’s programme.230

Even though it was now clear that Bethlen was abandoning the KNEP he still faced renewed difficulties with the Smallholders. His proposals for both a 25% reduction in the numbers enfranchised and the reintroduction of open ballot voting stimulated a great deal of Smallholder opposition. Nagyatádi-Szabó was uncertain how to respond. Although he had been negotiating with Bethlen on the franchise since 10 January, he was reduced to claiming that he was unaware of Bethlen’s proposals when questioned on 12 January.231 When the proposals were finally made public two days later both the parties were furious.

The KNEP was sharply opposed to any additional limitations on the number of women entitled to vote, particularly as they had generally supported the KNEP in the previous election, while the Smallholders were opposed to any reintroduction of the open ballot. Even though the formal process of unification was continuing, with the Smallholders setting up a five-member committee on 20 January to arrange how the dissident group and other smaller parties could enter the new party, relations were being strained by the franchise question.232 Even Bethlen’s threat to resign if his proposal was not accepted showed no sign of forcing the Smallholders to back down.233 Lacking the authority to bully the party into submission, he changed tack and in a complicated series of manoeuvres again positioned himself as the defender of the party’s interests.

On 23 January he launched another strong attack on the legitimists. This only added to the bitterness felt towards him by many in the KNEP and by the end of the month another ten to fifteen of their MPs had declared their refusal to join a Unified Party.234 It was, however, a price Bethlen was willing to pay. He had chosen the one area on which he was assured of unconditional Smallholder approval to bolster his

230 Budapesti Hírlap, 14 January, 1922.
231 Sipos, A Kisgazdapárt strukturája, p.227; Budapesti Hírlap, 13 January, 1922.
232 Budapesti Hírlap, 21 January, 1922.
234 Nemés, Iratok, ii. p.63; Budapesti Hírlap, 3 February, 1922.
support within the party and he received a rousing reception. Even the normally critical *Az Est* newspaper titled its editorial on the speech ‘He spoke much truth’.

Then on 25 January Bethlen appeared to give up his insistence on the open ballot declaring that he wished ‘to resolve the issue of the secret ballot in complete agreement with the party’.

Euphoria among the Smallholders was further fuelled by Nagyatádi-Szabó’s claim that ‘the principle of the secret ballot prevailed all the way’. The party immediately issued an appeal for all supporters of the government to join the party, and changed the name of the party to include the word ‘polgári’ (citizen).

With the mood in the party strongly in his favour, Bethlen made clear the following day that the open ballot clause would remain in the bill but deflected party anger by declaring that he would accept a free vote on the question. This was enough to gain the confidence of the liberal Smallholders. They were so confident that the clause would now be defeated when it came before the parliament, that they even prevented Bethlen’s proposal being considered by an internal party vote. It is a testament to Bethlen’s political skill that he had maneuvered the Smallholders into supporting his electoral reform even though they were fundamentally opposed to some of its key clauses.

Bethlen was fortunate that this situation was not put to the test by a parliamentary vote. Opposition MPs, who opposed the entirety of his franchise proposals, embarked on a process of obstruction. They believed that if no legislation passed before the dissolution of parliament, due on 16 February, the old franchise decree would remain on the statute books. They were also fearful that combined Smallholder and dissident support for Bethlen’s proposals would mean they were passed into law. Obstructionism only began to crumble when, on 6 February,

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236 *Budapesti Hírlap*, 26 January, 1922.
237 Romsics, István Bethlen, pp.176-177.
238 Sipos, A Kisgazdapárt fejlődése, p.429. See also Romsics, István Bethlen, pp.176-177 and *Budapesti Hírlap*, 27 January, 1922.
239 *Az Újság*, 28 January, 1922.
Bethlen made it absolutely clear that if a new electoral law was not passed before the dissolution the next election would be fought on his franchise proposals.\textsuperscript{240} Even though the parliament sat until the last hour possible, with the speaker even trying to stop the clocks so the debate could continue, time expired with no new franchise on the statute books.\textsuperscript{241}

The process of party unification was, however, reaching its conclusion. Bethlen’s concessions, and the fact that it was the opposition rather than the government that had prevented the franchise bill coming to a vote, was sufficient to prevent a breach emerging between the Smallholders and the government. The formal process of party unification was therefore able to continue. The dissidents, after some argument over the precise wording of the invitation issued on 25 January, joined the Smallholder Party on 2 February.\textsuperscript{242} By the end of the month, forty members of the Nemzeti Középpárt, (National Centre Party), and the Magyar Rendpárt, (Hungarian Party of Order), many of them former members of Istvan Tisza’s old governing party, had joined the party.\textsuperscript{243} Just like the pre-1918 governing party, the Unified Party was attracting support from the range of interests necessary for it to dominate the political landscape.

The final step was the appointment on 23 February of a new party leadership. Nagyatádi-Szabó continued to hold the position of party president but the increasingly conservative nature of the party was demonstrated by the fact that only one representative of the liberal Smallholders was appointed to the five-member deputy presidency. Conservatives also occupied both of the associate-president [társelnők] positions. The clearest indication, however, that Bethlen had fulfilled his goal of creating a new Unified Party was that he now occupied the most important position, that of party leader.\textsuperscript{244}

\textsuperscript{240} Budapesti Hírlap, 7, 8 February, 1922. Debate on the franchise was also delayed by the fact that 4 other bills were also passing through the parliament at this time.
\textsuperscript{241} Macartney, October 15\textsuperscript{th}, p.44.
\textsuperscript{242} Sipos, A Kisgazdapárt fejlődése, p.429.
\textsuperscript{243} Nemes, Iratok, ii, pp.66, 268-269.
Conclusion

This chapter argues that Bethlen was repeatedly forced to alter his tactics in order to form a new, broad-based party. In 1919, 1920, and several times in 1921, he altered his conception of how such a party could be created and which parties and factions the new party would be built around. He was also prepared to offer a number of concessions and to use all of his tactical skill to persuade sufficient numbers of Smallholders to accept the creation of a new party.

It is indicative of the level of resistance he encountered, particularly from the Smallholder party that even after he had formally created the Unified Party he was still unable to use this party to force through a new franchise. Furthermore, although Bethlen had sought to assert the government's authority over the administration, sustained opposition, particularly from the Smallholders, had prevented him from achieving this objective. The majority of the Smallholders continuously obstructed Bethlen's goal of a Unified Party, something that goes against claims that Nagyatádi-Szabó 'was largely a prisoner of his colleagues' and that party unification was a foregone conclusion. It required all of Bethlen's skill and patience to achieve party unification - it was by no means a foregone conclusion.

The model party established by the two Tiszas had therefore not yet been fully reconstructed. Bethlen still had to stamp his authority on the party, ensure the administration operated in the party's interest, and then lead the party to election victory. Although he had created a Unified Party in name, it still did not function as a dominant, governing party.

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245 See for example Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, p.15.
Chapter 2 – Bethlen and the MSZDP, 1920-1921

Introduction

Chapter one considered how Bethlen sought to reconstruct the old governing party of István Tisza. This chapter will consider how Bethlen sought to bolster political stability, and the legitimacy of the polity he was constructing. It will examine the process by which he reached an accommodation with the MSZDP in December 1921: the so-called ‘Bethlen-Peyer pact’.

Before 1918 the MSZDP had been effectively discounted from the political landscape. It had been unable to win a single seat in parliament. Although the Fejérvâry government sought to reach an accommodation with the MSZDP on electoral reform, the general tenor of relations between the MSZDP and the government can be characterized as hostile and punctuated by strikes and clashes with the authorities, such as the ‘bloody Thursday’ demonstration in May 1912. Nevertheless, the search for a solution to the ‘workers question’ was slowly becoming an important political question, as the attempt by some opposition politicians from 1912 onwards to find common ground with the MSZDP demonstrated.⁴

This question of how to respond to the challenge posed by the MSZDP had become especially pressing. Its participation in Béla Kun’s Bolshevik Räterrepublik, having merged with the communist party, had demonstrated both the power of the socialist movement and the continuing danger it posed, in an unreconstructed form, to the restoration of political stability.

This chapter will begin by considering how the MSZDP was affected by its reformation in 1919, by its election boycott, and by the international economic boycott.

of Hungary. It will then consider why there was no rapprochement between the
MSZDP and the Teleki government. It will examine different views of the MSZDP
within the government and how Bethlen’s first actions as prime minister affected this
ongoing powerful struggle between proponents of compromise and their hard-line
critics. It will then proceed to analyse the reasons for continuing tensions between the
MSZDP and the government as well the growing moderation of the MSZDP. The
exact provisions of the Bethlen-Peyer agreement will then be analysed. Finally, an
assessment of the agreement will be offered based around a consideration of the
reasons why Bethlen and the MSZDP actually engaged in negotiations.

The Reformation of the MSZDP

The reformation of the MSZDP took place at a meeting on 24 August 1919.
This meeting laid the framework within which the party would operate for the next
three years and beyond.

First the meeting confirmed the political power of the trade unions. Since
socialist political meetings were severely curtailed, it was a meeting of the trade
unions which made the decision to re-establish an independent social democratic
party. The party branches, that sprang up after this decision was taken, then formally
approved the unions’ action. The link between trade unionism and political socialism
is not in itself surprising, but whereas a slow process of disengagement between
narrow union interests and broader party representation was occurring elsewhere in
Europe, in Hungary the unions had taken the opportunity to reassert their control over
the party. Their authority was demonstrated by the way union representatives
occupied seven of the eleven places on the party’s leadership committee,

2 On relations between the trade unionists and the politicians within the MSZDP before 1918, see
3 Sipos, A szakszervezetek és a Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt, pp.56-57. On the 24 August
meeting see also Fehér, A Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt, pp.12-16.
[pártvezetőség], and by the way this union meeting had already begun to determine the policies of the MSZDP.\(^4\)

Union control of the party leadership ensured that party-political considerations were tied to the trade unions’ economic considerations. The focus was on providing tangible improvements for union members and this encouraging compromise in pursuit of practical results.\(^5\) Union influence also lessened the influence of those who had broken their links with the trade union movement by going into emigration. This again increased the possibility for a deal with the government as the émigrés tended to be more critical of, and unacceptable to, the government.\(^6\) The interlinking of the party and the unions also enhanced the MSZDP’s claim to represent a sizeable part of the workforce thus ensuring it would play a role in any discussion of the ‘workers question’. Unfortunately, union-party links also ensured that any union strikes could be regarded by the government as party-political actions which challenged not only a particular factory or industry but also the government’s entire economic policy.

The second key consequence of the meeting was its failure to make a clean break from its past involvement with the Bolsheviks. This boiled down to the issue of who should now be allowed to join the reformed party. The Woodworkers’ union demanded that anyone involved in communist agitation should be prevented from joining the party and one of the party leaders, Károly Peyer, spoke of ‘communist rubbish’. Others, however, argued that, ‘it is not possible to make the new party with new people’.\(^7\) It is indicative of the importance of the question that although the meeting was tightly controlled, the one motion which did not originate from the leadership committee but which was still passed, stated that not every former communist should be expelled from the party.\(^8\)

\(^4\) Ibid. p.56
\(^5\) Peyer’s own claim was that he was ‘first a trade unionist and secondly a politician’. Sipos, ‘Peyer Károly a munkásmozgalomban’, pp.1294-1295.
\(^7\) Péter Sipos, A szakszervezetek és a Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt, pp.53-54
\(^8\) Ibid.
Apart from the continuing sympathy of a part of the party to communism, there were practical reasons for not wishing to drive out every communist. In part, the exact question of what constituted participating in the Bolshevik dictatorship was in itself difficult to define. Did it, for example, include those who were merely suspected of a role? Furthermore there were simply too many former party members and trade unionists who had played some role in the Räterepublik for the party to exclude them all without the danger of provoking further splits within the socialist movement. Nevertheless the party failed to conduct even a nominal purge of former Bolsheviks. It even included on the leadership committee, Lajos Kitajka, who had previously been a leading communist agitator. If the Woodworkers' union felt that it was not enough just to formally break from communism then this was unlikely to satisfy those conservatives and counter-revolutionaries who viewed socialism and communism as one and the same.

The third key consequence of the meeting was that the party reaffirmed the 1903 programme. This was a wasted opportunity for it meant that the party did not formulate a new ideological platform that took into account the situation in which it now found itself. It was a safer option to return to the old certainties of 1903 but it effectively meant that the party now found itself encumbered with a political programme that was almost twenty years out of date.

The meeting therefore successfully reformed the party, but failed to put it on a new course. This helped confirm suspicions that the old socialist party, which had ultimately ended up in a coalition with the Bolsheviks, would in time again threaten political stability. The MSZDP's attempt to demonstrate that such criticism was misplaced, would now have to be conducted within the framework laid out at the 24 August meeting.
Election and Economic Boycotts

Debate within the MSZDP initially focussed not on the ideology of the party but its tactics. There was protracted argument about the advisability of participating in the Huszár government, which had been appointed by the victorious powers to organize the transition to a parliamentary system. Although several MSZDP members took posts in the cabinet, they felt compelled to resign in protest at their inability to shape the policies of the government. The consequences of failing to clearly separate the party from the communists were swiftly becoming clear. The party continued to suffer from anti-communist repression, which continued throughout the country. The first stage of the parliamentary elections in January 1920 were conducted in an atmosphere in which some of its meetings were banned, its candidates were arrested and ‘unofficial [anti-socialist] bands...[were] meting out lynch law’.

Aggrieved at the way it was being treated the party withdrew from the government and decided to boycott the elections.

A decisive factor in this decision was the murder of the editor and an assistant of the Népszava on 17 February 1920, the so-called ‘Bácso and Somogyi murders’, which became something of a socialist cause celebre complete with mass funeral, frequent visits to the graveside and the unproved suspicion that the government and the regent had authorized the killings.

The resignation of socialist ministers from the Huszár government and the boycott of the electoral campaign demonstrated that the majority of the party favoured a period of inactivity. Indeed, there remained an element within the party that opposed any direct involvement in political life as an unacceptable compromise. It is nevertheless important to note that the party had not in principle rejected the political process but rather had chosen passivity as a tactical response to the continuing

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9 Magyarország története, ii, p.411.
10 Macartney, October 15th, i, p.23.
11 Fehér, A Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt, pp.73-92.
repression. Implicit in this approach was a willingness to negotiate with the government and re-enter political life if that course appeared more likely to yield results. It is vital to our understanding of the development of the party through 1920-1921, to recognize that with each passing week in which inactivity appeared to achieve nothing and the government slowly consolidated its position, the pressure for negotiations increased. This, however, was by no means obvious in the first months of the boycott. By March 1920, with repression continuing, several of the party leaders (Peyer and Manó Buchinger) decided to go into exile.

The party was further damaged by the federation of international trade unions’ embargo of Hungary’s trade and communications. This was not because the MSZDP called for the embargo or supported its continuation. The party refused to support the action, declared that it was the workers who were suffering the most from its effects, and when the boycott finally collapsed in August 1920, rejoiced at the opportunity for ‘economic renewal’. Nevertheless the trade unions’ dominance of the party, the internationalist character of socialism, and the similar aims of socialists inside and outside Hungary ensured that conservative opinion regarded the MSZDP as complicit in the boycott. This view appeared to be strengthened by the sporadic strikes that broke out in support of the boycott and the party’s willingness to engage in unsuccessful discussions to resolve the crisis. Thus, the party gained prominence from its links with the far left and its inter-relationship of political and economic objectives, but it also suffered from these links by failing to win any credit for its position of general passivity.

The failure of both the electoral and the economic boycott to persuade the government to change its policies did, however, further undermine the argument that the regime would swiftly collapse. This in turn strengthened the position of those in the party who felt that some form of rapprochement with the government was necessary.

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12 Nemes, Az ellenforradalom története Magyarországon, pp.253-258.
13 Budapesti Hírlap, 1 July 1920.
First Steps Towards Rapprochement

There were already indications that the MSZDP was moderating its hostility to the regime. An article in the Népszava welcomed Horthy’s election as regent - a clear indication that the MSZDP had lost some of its bitterness towards the counter-revolution. This was followed by the party leadership’s acceptance of the need for a slight change in the party’s tactics at a meeting on 6 March 1920. The principal objective was now to be the legalisation of the party and trade union activities: a more realistic goal than earlier demands for a role in the government. On the same day, and again two days later, socialist delegations led by Ferenc Miákits and János Vanczák, two of the strongest supporters of the need for compromise, visited the regent to ask him to act as a mediator.

At the resulting discussions with the government, the MSZDP representatives announced their willingness to abandon the electoral boycott but only if the government restored basic rights and freedoms. The government responded by calling on the MSZDP to aid the consolidation of the nation, work in the public interest [közérdek], re-enter politics and play no role in government until ‘the regrouping of the workers into the new Zeitgeist [érzelemvilág] has occurred’. In return the government promised that basic freedoms would be ensured, the trade unions could operate freely, those who had not committed any crime would be freed and a committee would be established to oversee reform of the internment camps.

This package offered too little to the party to be acceptable. It maintained many of the restrictions on party and union activities, while offering only the restoration of freedoms that might occur when the government’s exceptional powers, granted to it in wartime, expired. The whole of the government’s package was also

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14 Magyarország története, ii, p.420.
15 Ibid.
16 OLK, 808, 76.
17 Ibid.
contingent on the party fulfilling such undefined requirements as operating in the 'public interest'. An awareness that the party would secure no immediate concessions in return for abandoning its boycott was sufficient to ensure the discussions came to nothing. As a later report on these negotiations drawn up for Bethlen made clear, real reforms, such as the immediate abolition of internment, were needed before an agreement could be reached with the MSZDP.\textsuperscript{18}

The chances of breaking the deadlock were not helped by the inherent weaknesses of the Teleki government that was appointed on 15 June 1920. Its lack of strong parliamentary support and its preoccupation with other issues such as the peace treaty and the Numerus Clausus combined to limit the incentives and possibilities of reaching some form of compromise.

Nevertheless there were indications that some kind of rapprochement was not far off. Although little was actually being done to find some form of accommodation within the MSZDP the need for a solution to the 'workers question' remained within the manifestos of all the parties and each successive government. At the very least, this indicated that all the parties regarded the current state of affairs as unacceptable. Also, although the authorities discussions with the MSZDP had come to nothing they at least endorsed the principle of discussion and the idea that the MSZDP held the key to the 'workers question'.

The very fact that the socialist trade unions maintained and even increased their strength was a constant reminder of the importance of the MSZDP. Even at the high point of anti-socialist feeling in 1920 the trade unions still had 152,441 members rising to 202,956 by 1922 as compared to 107,188 in the whole of old Hungary in 1914.\textsuperscript{19} In contrast the Nemzeti Munkásegyesülések Blokkja, (the Block of National Workers' Unions), the direct political representative of the Christian Socialist trade unions, was reduced by January 1921 to appealing to the government for support.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} OLK, 808, 16, 1-2.
Péter Sipos contemptuously dismisses its attempt to provide an adequate alternative to social democracy as amounting to ‘a few pamphlets and unpaid bills’.\(^{21}\)

There were, however, counter-arguments for simply obliterating any remaining vestiges of social democracy from the political life of the country. The communist historian, Dezső Nemes, overstates the case when he argues that the regime initially sought to establish a fascist system based on complete control of workers interests.\(^{22}\) Nevertheless, there were those on the extreme right who continued to argue that the MSZDP was directly responsible for causing the revolution. They claimed that ‘the destructive spirit of Hungarian social democracy took the factory workers, and with them the country, into bolshevism’. Their proposed solution was a permanent ban on party activities and the nationalisation of the trade unions.\(^{23}\) Even some mainstream politicians such as the Smallholder leader Gyula Rubinek declared that ‘I don’t recognize the difference between someone who is not communist but calls himself social democrat because whoever is that today is tomorrow [a] Bolshevik’.\(^{24}\)

Senior political figures such as Teleki and Bethlen, however, remained determined to come to some kind of accommodation with the MSZDP. On 10 October 1920, Teleki declared that the time was coming when such an outcome could occur although he continued to demand that the unions must be kept apart from politics.\(^{25}\) Bethlen took a more flexible approach. In his acceptance speech on becoming an MP he argued that the socialists should be treated like anyone else though he still emphasized the need to punish guilty party members and demanded that the party break from internationalism.\(^{26}\) The moderate nature of this speech, with its recognition of the distinctions between communism and social democracy, even received a positive reception from the socialists. The party newspaper Világ in 1918

\(^{21}\) Sipos, The Trade Unions, Employers and the State, p.129.  
\(^{22}\) Nemes, Iratok, ii, p.27.  
\(^{24}\) Ferenc Pölöiskei, Horthy és Hatalmi rendszere, p.88.  
\(^{25}\) Nemes, Az ellenforradalom története, p.384.  
\(^{26}\) Romsics, István Bethlen, pp.132-133.
had described Bethlen as ‘one of the darkest knights of reaction’ but now Népszava called him ‘a man of higher principles’ and ‘a voice in the wilderness’.

Debate within the Government

Important changes in the way the government conducted ‘social-political’ policy were also taking place. On 10 December 1920, State Secretary Pál Petri called for all the disparate government departments to hand over their responsibilities in this area to the prime minister’s office. The subsequent reorganisation handed the responsibilities of five ministries to the prime minister’s newly created social-political department. This improved the efficiency of policy making.

This was not, however, the only motivation. Some of the ministries had operated as a block on progress. Petri described the army ministry as exercising a ‘bothersome influence’ on social policy. It was the one ministry that retained its power to intervene on social legislation. It was also liable to obstruct any progress in this area since it regarded any relaxation of government policy as compromising the security of the country. This was underscored by army pressure for returning prisoners of war to be carefully monitored for security purposes, and by the dispute that broke out between the army minister Sándor Belitska and the interior minister Gyula Ferdinándy.

In February 1921 Belitska and Ferdinándy clashed over the use of the gendarmerie. At a cabinet meeting on 8 February Belitska, influenced by growing concerns about Red Army advances and a new wave of strikes, sought to reaffirm his authority. He presented a motion declaring that ‘only the military works effectively in the area of defence against socialism’. Other ministers,

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28 Romsics, István Bethlen, p.133.
however, took the opportunity to press for changes. The foreign minister urged the government to win over moderate socialists and Ferdinándy pressed for the creation of a committee to monitor the army’s operations. The dispute became so serious that on 19 February Ferdinándy resigned, implying that the army ministry had won this particular argument. The increasingly repressive nature of the government was demonstrated by a circular letter from the new interior minister, Pál Tomcsányi, demanding that all meetings which ‘stir up strike organization’ be banned. He claimed that these strikes were ‘due to centrally directed [központi] or even foreign power aims’. Furthermore Law III of 1921 increased the penalties for those who had committed crimes under the Bolshevik regime, and the communist party was thereby ‘in practice forced underground’.

There remained, however, moderate voices within the government. Petri’s reforms had ensured that the new social-political department would have the ability to press for reforms. The new department head, Zoltán Bencs, reported in March 1921 that the MSZDP had broken from the Marxist ‘third international’ and returned to the more moderate position of the ‘Second international’. The ‘Third International’ was based in Moscow, promulgated revolutionary communism and was adhered to by the communists. The Second International was based in Paris and was made up of affiliated social democratic parties that followed a moderate programme. In claiming that the MSZDP was operating in accordance with the Second International, Bencs was therefore indicating that he believed the MSZDP had broken from bolshevism and was becoming a normal social democratic party.

Bencs sought to demonstrate this contention in a subsequent report on the party’s activities. In this report he subverted the argument that the destructive nature

31 Nemés, Az ellenforradalom története, pp.418-419.
32 Dokumentumok a magyar forradalmi munkásmozgalom történetéből 1919-1929, p.126.
33 Romsics, István Bethlen, p.149.
34 Little is known about Bencs. There is no biography about him and he is generally overlooked by Marxist and non-Marxist historians. He would however play a formative role in shaping social policy in the early years of the Bethlen government.
35 Fehér, A Magyarországi Szocialdemokrata Párt, pp.165-166
of the MSZDP required a repressive government response. He argued that it was precisely because it was repressed and forced to operate secretly, that destructive influences were able to enter the party. These destructive influences could be prevented if the party was allowed to operate openly. His proposed solution was to negotiate with the socialists on the basis of a reduction in censorship, legalization of unions and party, an amnesty, work for freed prisoners, the end of speeded-up prosecutions, and the provision of ‘equitable’ workers insurance. In return the MSZDP would be required to formally break from the Third International and operate within the law, while the unions would distance themselves from politics and avoid all strikes that threatened the public interest.  

Not only was this report at odds with the anti-reformist opinions of the army ministry but it also went some way beyond what Teleki was offering the MSZDP. Bencs had introduced the new condition of a limit to strike action and left unclear precisely how the trade unions should be separated from politics. Nevertheless the entire package was a major step forward from the government’s proposals in March 1920. Unfortunately even if Teleki had been prepared to give Bencs’s ideas serious consideration, his attention was swiftly distracted by the events of the Easter coup attempt.

The appointment of Bethlen on 15 April 1921 provided Bencs with an opportunity to shore up his position. He immediately dispatched a four-page memorandum, strongly defending Petri’s reforms as a means of ensuring Bethlen’s authority over social policy and added his own recommendation that the government aim to ‘redirect the social question into the normal channel’. In his notes on the memorandum Bethlen expressed his support for these arguments.

The fact that there was now a branch of the government advocating compromise with the MSZDP did not automatically ensure an immediate softening of the government’s position. Tomcsányi continued as justice minister, Belitska

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37 Fehér, A Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt, pp.165-166.
38 OLK, 808, 39, 1-4.
remained army minister, and the army continued to interfere in social policy. Nevertheless Bencs continued to press for reform of social policy. On 18 April he sent another memorandum to Bethlen. This superficially urged support for the rival Christian socialist unions and the co-ordination of measures against ‘destructive’ workers. The underlying argument within the memorandum, however, placed the responsibility for progress on the government, arguing that it needed to persuade the workers to use constitutional devices and support the national interest.\(^{39}\)

The following day Bencs presented a situation report on the ‘workers’. He argued that the solution to economic difficulty was not to squeeze wages, as this would only encourage strikes which would in themselves damage production. The medicine, he suggested, was worse than the cure.\(^{40}\) Implicit in this argument was the idea not only that the government should consider intervention towards wage arbitration but also that the actual cause of these strikes was simply economic dissatisfaction stemming from low wages. Bencs implied that such strikes were not political and would be best limited by rising wages rather than by continued repression. This challenged Tomcsányi’s assertion in March that the strikes were being driven by a political agenda. He also repeated his earlier argument that revolutionary propaganda was actually more effective underground and would be lessened by moderation, i.e. liberalization, of the right of assembly. He reminded Bethlen that there was a need to consider the large number of moderate social democrats who were affected and possibly radicalized by such repression, and finally he argued that such concessions would be conducive to a more effective foreign policy.\(^{41}\)

It is suggestive that the range of reasons Bencs used to justify reform may all have been used because resistance to reform was unlikely to be overcome with one particular line of argument. In other words, his use of multiple arguments is in itself an indication of the strength of opposition to reform within the government.

\(^{39}\) OLK, 808, 39, 5-6.
\(^{40}\) Nemes, Iratok, ii, p.245.
\(^{41}\) Ibid.
Nevertheless Bethlen did not dismiss Bencs's arguments. Indeed he now took the first small steps towards a rapprochement with the MSZDP.

Bethlen's First Steps

Bethlen's opening speech to parliament contained a number of indications that he was preparing for reform. He proclaimed his desire to see censorship lifted and basic freedoms reintroduced when they were no longer 'destructive'. He also denounced the 'many measures still in force which are demeaning to the working class' and even declared his willingness to negotiate with the socialists over pension, health and accident insurance reform.42 It is somewhat over critical of Romsics to condemn the vagueness of Bethlen's proposals for compromise.43 Initial outlines of programmes given to parliament were not the place for detailed policy announcements. In any case, to lay out what was precisely on offer would have seriously compromised the government's position in any negotiations.

The first practical consequence of this new approach was Bethlen's authorization of the traditional socialist May Day parades, which had been forbidden in 1920. In order that these parades were now stripped of their previous overtly political character the local authorities were instructed to use force to prevent any political or internationalist demonstrations.44 The justice minister expressed his concerns about the decision, but Bethlen insisted that non-political meetings be permitted on the grounds that the socialists 'need to be brought back into the proper life of the state'.45

The reasonable behaviour of the MSZDP, (the Budapest chief of police reported that its members avoided political confrontation and only one meeting had to be broken up), was seized upon by Bencs.46 On 10 May 1921 he wrote to Bethlen

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42 Bethlen István Gróf beszédei, ii, pp.155-160; Romsics, István Bethlen, pp.151-152.
43 Romsics, István Bethlen, p.151.
44 Vas county Archive, (hereafter VML) 401a, unnumbered.
45 Nemes, Iratok, ii, p.246.
46 OLK, 808, 20, 1.
claiming this demonstrated that the MSZDP had become ‘more sober and healthier’.
He pointed to a speech by István Farkas, one of the leaders of the MSZDP, who
declared that the party wanted to work in the national interest, as evidence that the
socialists were ‘not opponents of the national idea’. Thus, at the same time that
Farkas was redefining the internationalist principles of the MSZDP, Bencs was
challenging concerns in the government that such internationalist principles were a
threat to the nation.

On 20 May Bencs launched another attack on prevailing notions about the
socialist movement. This time he used an article in the Népszava to support his
arguments. Referring to a report in the paper on increasing prosperity in America
between 1913 and 1920, he argued that ‘if this is really true it would more easily
explain why there are no revolutionary tendencies in the American workers
movement’. This challenged the idea that the MSZDP was inherently revolutionary,
since it suggested that economic growth rather than authoritarian measures would
moderate the workers. It also implied that labour unrest was a result rather than a
cause of economic decline, further undermining the economic arguments for
restricting socialist activity. Although he placed his argument in the conditional,
probably in part because it relied on information from a socialist newspaper, he must
have been aware that America had enjoyed a period of prolonged economic growth
and relative social calm, and that official confirmation of these points would
strengthen his argument for reform.

The army, however, strongly resisted such arguments. The first cabinet
meeting of Bethlen’s government agreed that the current level of censorship could not
be maintained. Belitska, however, sought to head off any reformist intentions at a
cabinet meeting on 28 April 1921. Returning to the issue of censorship he argued that
the current delays and mistakes could be solved not by reducing censorship but by
almost doubling the number of censors from 158 to 270. While this would have

47 OLK, 808, 42, 1-16.
48 OLK, 808, 43, 1-14.
49 Nemes, Iratok, ii, p.129.
certainly led to a swifter operation, it would also have broadened the scope of the censors. Again divisions emerged within the cabinet, with the finance and trade ministers strongly opposing such a move on the grounds that censorship was impeding the country’s development.

Unlike in February, the army minister on this occasion did not receive the prime minister’s full support. Bethlen did not want to act openly against him and precipitate further divisions and the possibility of resignations. Instead he cleverly ensured that the case for reform would be further strengthened before he openly accepted it. He declared that there were valid arguments on both sides and proposed that the trade minister consider the issue further.\(^50\) Since the trade minister had made clear his concerns about the effects of censorship on foreign trade, it comes as little surprise that Bethlen subsequently used his report to demand reform. When censorship was again raised at the 27 May cabinet meeting, the prime minister rejected any further increase in the number of censors and actually ordered the end of internal telegram censorship.\(^51\) He also further demonstrated his dissatisfaction with Belitska’s position by removing censorship from the army’s sphere of authority and making it the responsibility of the interior ministry.\(^52\)

Such actions demonstrated that Bethlen was prepared to countenance reform. In the first weeks of his government, Bethlen had already gone further than Teleki had managed in his entire premiership. Nevertheless, permitting the May Day celebrations, tinkering with state censorship and breaking the stranglehold of the army ministry over social policy were not in themselves actions that could bring the MSZDP to the negotiating table.

\(^50\) OLK, 27, Mt.jkv, 28 April 1921.
\(^51\) Nemes, Iratok, ii, p.136.
\(^52\) Megfigyelés alatt, p.80.
Continuing Caution

As well as doubts about how moderate the socialist movement really was, two other factors prevented Bethlen from contemplating an immediate agreement with the MSZDP. First, he was unwilling to allow the socialists to play any role in shaping the government’s economic policies. This was demonstrated shortly after he became prime minister. A delegation of trade unionists visited the trade minister to press for the introduction of some form of unemployment benefit, but when this was brought before the cabinet on 5 May Bethlen ‘absolutely’ rejected any such attempt to interfere with the government’s economic policy, while the finance minister claimed that such ideas ‘led to communism’. This showed that a fear of communism could be found in more places than just the army ministry. It also underlined that as long as economic demands were central to the MSZDP’s programme little progress could be expected.

The second reason for Bethlen’s caution was that he continued to place the emphasis on strengthening his own position. Even in those areas where he was prepared to permit reform, the primary motivation was to shore up his position in parliament.

In February 1921, several liberal parties had joined together to form the Polgárok és Munkások Szövetség, (PMSZ), (Association of Citizens and Workers). The left-wing opposition had gained further impetus with the departure of Rassay and five supporters from the governing coalition on 15 February and the return of the leading liberal Vilmos Vázsonyi from Switzerland. With support from the ‘octobrist’ Függetlenségi és 48-as Párt, (Independence and 48-ers Party), whose leader Mártón Lovászy had worked with the socialist emigration in exile, there was even talk of creating a broad anti-government coalition of socialists, liberals and disaffected Smallholders. Although for the time being Vázsonyi kept his options open, considering a coalition with other legitimists, the remainder of the liberals formed a

53 OLK, 27, Mt.jkv, 5 May, 1921.
loose coalition with the MSZDP, complete with shared party offices and the goal of a national organization.\textsuperscript{54}

This represented only a minor threat to the government in parliament. It did, nevertheless, present two potential dangers. First the MSZDP was clearly entering into a more aggressive and oppositional course of action. Népszava even declared that the party had now ‘abandoned the position of political passivity’.\textsuperscript{55} Secondly there was the danger that other elements in the governing coalition might join the new association. Certainly, the forty MPs of the liberal wing of the Smallholders party, which followed Nagyatádi-Szabó, had links to the PMSZ with some Smallholders openly applauding its formation. One of Nagyatádi-Szabó’s confidants actually joined the opposition while discussions were held between the two groups.\textsuperscript{56}

In retrospect it appears improbable that the Smallholders ever seriously considered joining with the liberal opposition against the government; one need only look at Nagyatádi-Szabó’s vicious criticisms of the liberal opposition, calling its membership the ‘new Herod’.\textsuperscript{57} Nevertheless the possibility that the two groupings might unite to defeat the government on a particular issue remained a serious possibility. Indeed, at the end of April, a fresh attack on the government’s use of internment and extra-judicial measures by the liberals appeared likely to gain the support of a sufficient number of Smallholder MPs to defeat Bethlen on this question.\textsuperscript{58} Liberal Smallholders also sought to force their party into action with Rupert Rezső putting forward a proposal to the leadership committee that it should demand the immediate end of all exceptional powers.\textsuperscript{59}

Bethlen, however, moved swiftly to avert the danger. As well as authorizing limited reforms of censorship, he made a symbolic visit to the main internment camp at Zalaegerszeg. He then ordered that some inmates should be released, conditions

\textsuperscript{54} Nagy, Bethlen liberális ellenzéke, pp.36-38.
\textsuperscript{55} Sipos, Légalis es illegalis munkásmozgalom, pp.62-63.
\textsuperscript{56} Nagy, Bethlen liberális ellenzéke, pp.38-39.
\textsuperscript{57} Új Barátda, 1 January, 1921.
\textsuperscript{58} Az Újság, 30 April, 1921.
\textsuperscript{59} Fehér, A Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt, p.171.
improved and cases reviewed more quickly and frequently. The cabinet also approved a review of the government’s exceptional powers, limiting the use of extra-judicial investigations and ended the army’s role in policing. This was enough to persuade a majority of the Smallholder party to defend the government’s position against demands for complete reform, and they even expelled Rupert Rezső for continuing to criticise the government.

Thus the reforms instigated by Bethlen were primarily a political tactic rather than being reflective of reformist sensibilities. This was amply demonstrated by a speech Bethlen gave in parliament on 1 June 1921. In this speech, he attacked the MSZDP and made the unsubstantiated claim that they were secretly co-operating with the Bolshevik emigration. This attack itself needs, however, to be seen within the context of Bethlen’s determination to shore up his support within the parliament rather than as a mark of any fresh change in policy towards the MSZDP. It was an astute move to attack the socialists who most conservatives disliked: the Smallholders duly applauded his speech. Also by linking social democracy with communism he justified the continuation of the exceptional powers. These powers had been criticized for affecting moderate social democrats as well as Bolsheviks but such criticisms became moot if these two groups were actually one and the same. Finally, it is worth noting that street demonstrations had broken out in Budapest on May 26 targeting prominent liberals. Bethlen’s attack on the MSZDP may therefore also have been motivated by a wish to deflect attention back to the extreme left and away from ‘moderate liberalism.’

Three factors, therefore, needed to occur before Bethlen would be willing to meet the MSZDP at the negotiating table. He had to believe that they were a moderate

\[\text{\textsuperscript{60}}\] Megfigyelés alatt, pp.78-79; Sipos, A kisgazdapárt strukturája, pp.215-218.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{61}}\] Új Barátda 12, 26 May and 3 June, Az Újság 12 May, 1921 and Budapesti Hírlap, 1 June, 1921; Sipos, ‘A kisgazdapárt és a Bethlen kormány kezdeti tevékenysége’, p.672.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{62}}\] Új Barátda, 4 June, 1921.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{63}}\] Nagy, Bethlen liberális ellenzéke, p.44.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{64}}\] His argument was also not entirely without foundation since there were still communists within the MSZDP including those who actually followed the émigré ‘világosság’ group. See György Borsányi, ‘Az ellenforradalom rendszer kialakulása, A forradalmi munkásmozgalom a húszas években’ in Előadások a magyar forradalmi munkásmozgalom történetéből, Budapest, 1972-73, p.75.
party that posed no threat to political stability. The MSZDP had to abandon its attempts to influence the government's economic policy, and it had to become politically expedient for Bethlen to reach an agreement with the socialists.

Growing MSZDP and Government Moderation

Throughout June, the government continued to issue mixed signals on how it intended to deal with the socialist opposition. On 16 June 1921 the interior minister ordered that all föispáns should strictly monitor newspaper activity, send reports on what action they planned to take, and in serious cases close offending papers down. Then on 25 June he expressed his concern about continuing socialist organizing and ordered the authorities to be especially vigilant about socialist party activities. In the same document, however, he also permitted all meetings that were purely concerned with economic matters if the organizers were trustworthy and the meetings did not disturb economic activity. Clearly, this was a significant step forward, for although it was hedged with conditions, (the clarification that only meetings purely concerned with economic activities should be permitted was repeated six times in the two-page document), it did restore some rights of association to the trade unions. Furthermore, since the difference between economic and political activity remained undefined, the government was also handing responsibility and thus flexibility to the local authorities to decide precisely how the new directive should be applied. This was an eminently sensible step since effective legislation needed to take into account the varying strength, activity, and radicalism of trade unionism across the country.

Bencs was also continuing to promote reform. He responded to Bethlen's claims that the socialists were co-operating with the communists by arguing that the government needed to act to separate the two groups. His proposal can be seen as simply calling for a clause to be added into any agreement requiring the MSZDP to

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65 PML, IV, 401a, 17, 22.  
66 OLK, 808, 71.  
67 OLK, 808, 38, 29.
break with the emigration. It can, however, also be seen as promoting a subtler approach in which the very act of engaging the MSZDP in negotiations would require it to break away from the uncompromising stance of the émigrés. Either way Bencs had turned this criticism of the MSZDP into another reason for entering into negotiations.

Increasing signs of socialist moderation strengthened his arguments. On 6 July, the largest trade union, the Iron and Metalworkers’ union, wrote to the government proclaiming its loyalty to the country. This protestation was, however, coupled with unrealistic demands for freedom of travel, the introduction of the eight-hour day and tax reductions. Peyer’s speech in Tatabánya on 10 July 1921 was a far more important development. He argued that the regime did not need to be afraid of the MSZDP which was prepared to offer the government their support, declared that the party had broken with the communists, and pointed to the German and Austrian examples of socialist co-operation with the government. Even the demands made at the meeting for the return of basic freedoms, legalization of the unions, and a general amnesty were more realistic in that they did not include any specific attempt to interfere in the government’s economic policy.

The importance of Peyer’s Tatabánya speech lay not only in its moderate language but also in its clarification of the party’s key objectives. The demand for the reintroduction of basic freedoms had been frequently repeated and had been made the leading priority by the trade unions conference of October 1920. Nevertheless there had also been persistent demands for changes in economic policy. In April 1921, the party had listed its immediate demands as the implementation of public works projects, a reduction in the working week, and the forbidding of large-scale redundancies. We have already noted how Bethlen rejected the demands of a trade
union delegation for economic reform and how the Iron and Metalworkers’ union letter of early July also sought similar economic reforms.\textsuperscript{72}

It was, however, hardly credible for the party to expect the government to permit such interference in economic policy when it was still unsure whether the socialist movement should be allowed similar rights to other opposition parties. Peyer’s speech at Tatabánya implicitly recognized the weaknesses of the socialist position and the impracticality of such economic demands. He, therefore, again made the restoration of civil liberties the core demand of the party: a necessary first step before anything else could be accomplished. The growing control over the party exercised by Peyer’s supporters ensured it was the Tatabánya manifesto rather than the demands for economic reform which would now be repeated by union and party meetings and which would form the basis of the MSZDP’s future negotiating position.\textsuperscript{73}

The MSZDP’s focus on the restoration of liberties partly stemmed from its belief that Bethlen would not follow through on his promises. Perhaps the party was too influenced by its own rhetoric which denounced the regime as aggressively counter-revolutionary. The MSZDP continued to believe that without pressure the parliament would continue to extend the exceptional powers \textit{ad infinitum}. There is, however, little evidence to support such a contention either in the public comments or the private correspondence of the government. Indeed Bethlen had already promised such reform in his first parliamentary speech as prime minister, although he had also secured parliament’s approval for the exceptional powers to be prolonged until June 1922. He therefore found the MSZDP in the entirely tolerable position of demanding something that he was already committed to providing. Even though it was the MSZDP that was conducting a boycott of the regime, in government circles the discussion was now not about whether they could negotiate with the MSZDP but

\textsuperscript{72} OLK, 808, 23, 9.
\textsuperscript{73} OLK, 808, 27, 3; Fehér, \textit{A Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt}, p.193.
rather when they would condescend to treat the MSZDP as a valid negotiating partner.

Some Marxist historians certainly saw the events of July, and Peyer’s Tatabánya speech, as a major turning point in the attitude of the MSZDP, confirming the MSZDP’s willingness to compromise. This perspective played down, or even overlooked, the demands that were still being made at the Tatabánya meeting. Oddly, Bencs was also of the opinion that this was a decisive step. He wrote of the need to ‘put the past behind us and recognize the working class’. But the military’s report on Tatabánya rejected this conclusion, writing that the MSZDP remained ‘in every respect opposed to the present system and the present government’. András Fehér’s argument that Bethlen was still not prepared to make any decisive steps, instead preferring to wait and see which side would be proved right, is therefore probably perceptive.

An opportunity for a breakthrough had come with the discussions between the MSZDP and the government, which had been taking place since the end of May 1921, concerning the future of the Általanos Fogyasztási Szövetkezet, (AFOSZ), (General Consumers Co-operative). These had actually developed into direct negotiations over the question of workers insurance, but they broke down over the role of the state in this area.

Concerns continued to be voiced about socialist agitation with local officials in Pest county writing of the danger of pamphlet agitation and reporting that communists were still active in a number of areas. Perhaps influenced by these reports, and compelled to do something to justify Bethlen’s earlier claims of socialist-communist co-operation, the Budapest police at the end of July 1921 arrested a number of liberals and socialists including the deputy editor of Népszava on charges

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74 Magyarország története, ii, p.447.
75 Fehér, A Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt, p.181.
76 OLK, 808, 25, 1-7.
77 Fehér, A Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt, p.181.
79 PML, IV, 401a, 17-19, 28.
of co-operating with the emigration. The effect of this action was, however, somewhat mitigated by the appointment of a new chief of police in Budapest on 7 August. This move was welcomed by the MSZDP who expected a more tolerant regime than the one operated by his predecessor. A party delegation even visited his flat and took the opportunity to restate their opposition to internationalism and their wish to serve the homeland. A more conciliatory line also appears to have been gaining ground in the government with the interior minister, Ráday, writing to police chiefs on 2 August, that the larger and more sober part of the MSZDP supported consolidation. While demanding an end to all anti-state socialist activities, he also wrote ‘I wish to hold in the maximum possible respect the active worker’s rights of association’.  

All the indications were, therefore, that both the government and the MSZDP were gradually moderating their position. Not only was the rhetoric of both sides changing but also subtle shifts had occurred in each side’s position. The MSZDP now placed the emphasis on securing political freedoms, in effect being treated as a normal political party. In turn, those within the government such as Bencs who claimed that the restoration of political freedoms would moderate the MSZDP, were slowly winning the argument. The events of the autumn would confirm the impression that the MSZDP was now a party the government could do business with.

The MSZDP Demonstrates its Moderation

The first real opportunity for the party to demonstrate its moderate outlook came with Hungary’s reoccupation of south Baranya, Baja and Új Szeged at the end of August 1921. The issue of Baranya had been particularly problematic since leading socialists there had effectively run an autonomous socialist province under Yugoslav military authority. Regardless of the differences between the Baranya socialists and

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82 PML, IV, 401a, 20, 1921.
the MSZDP, the sight of proclaimed socialists opposing the return of territory to Hungarian rule had strengthened the convictions of those who regarded the entire socialist movement as inherently unpatriotic.\(^{83}\)

The MSZDP sought to counter this suspicion by urging all party supporters in Baranya to work with the Hungarian authorities as they reasserted control.\(^{84}\) A smooth take-over was also of great importance to the government. It was seeking a ‘showcase’ transfer of authority to bolster its claims to maintain control of the disputed Burgenland territory and strengthen its overall case for revision. One of Bethlen’s closest advisers, Miklós Kozma, was particularly impressed by the MSZDP’s behaviour in Baranya. He noted that they agreed to break from the emigration, refrain from strikes, work to refute allegations of terror and fraud, ensure that the local socialist newspaper Munkás remained ‘sober’, and allowed Kozma to veto trade union leadership appointments. There was even socialist support for the army’s supervision of the mines.\(^{85}\) At the end of September, Kozma held discussions with a confidant of Peyer. He was informed that the MSZDP was ready to give up its electoral boycott and break from the emigration in return for an end to internment, the restoration of basic legal freedoms and permission for some of the émigrés to return.\(^{86}\)

We should not overestimate the importance of the MSZDP’s conduct in Baranya; in reality it had no alternative but to co-operate with the government. Any obstruction of the authorities’ work would only have served to reinforce suspicions of the party’s lack of patriotism. Furthermore, as the muted international reaction to accusations of repression had demonstrated, there was little willingness abroad to put real pressure on the regime. The government, therefore, had something of a free hand in domestic affairs. The MSZDP was also wary of relying on the liberal opposition to challenge the government’s actions. The PMSZ appeared to have achieved nothing of substance since its formation, while the suspicion remained that the liberals were

\(^{83}\) For a detailed investigation into the Baranya question see Tihany, The Baranya Dispute 1918-1921.
\(^{84}\) Sipos, ‘Peyer Károly a munkásmozgalomban’, p.1297.
\(^{85}\) Nemes, Iratok, ii, pp.195-199.
\(^{86}\) Ibid.
more concerned about a powerful MSZDP than they were about the policies of the government. Talk of fielding joint candidates in the elections due to be held in the newly liberated territories, proved to be short-lived. The MSZDP continued to pursue an independent policy of boycotting all elections.

Bethlen was also unprepared to press for an agreement with the MSZDP at this moment. He was still preoccupied with building a Unified Party to support his government. He did, however, indicate in a speech at Pécs on 21 October 1921 that the government’s repression of the workers’ movement was ending. He declared that, ‘now there is a need not to punish but to build and restore good health’ and he promised ‘modern democratic reforms to defend the workers’. There was, though, no immediate possibility of translating these words into actions since precisely at this moment the return of Charles IV threw the whole nation into turmoil.

This coup attempt did at least provide another opportunity for relations to be improved between the two sides. There were still signs of bitter hostility to the government among traditional socialist supporters. Horthy’s proclamation concerning the crisis was torn down in the most densely populated industrial areas. Nevertheless, the MSZDP did not seek to exploit the government’s difficulties. Népszava declared its opposition to the king’s return, and party leaders ensured that calm was preserved on the streets. In return the government demonstrated its recognition of the value of the MSZDP’s passivity, with Kozma keeping the party informed of events throughout the coup period.

The whole episode demonstrated that the MSZDP could be trusted. Also the government, by making an effort to retain the MSZDP’s support, was aware that it was too important to be simply overlooked. It also improved the government’s

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87 Nagy, Bethlen liberális ellenzéke, p.46.
88 Fehér, A Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt, p.186.
89 Serfőzö, A MSZDP, pp.18-19.
90 OLK, 808, 70, 3.
91 Romsics, Ellenforradalom es konszolidáció, p.160.
standing among the opposition who regarded a Habsburg regime with even more
trepidation than they viewed the current government.93

Renewed Pressure for a Rapprochement

Such moves were sufficient to provide a fillip to those in the government
arguing for reform. There were still elements of the administration, connected to the
army ministry, who remained distrustful of any MSZDP activity. For example, the
paramilitary gendarmerie (csendőrség) in Miskolc reported that the party remained a
tyannical organization and described its activities as being based around 'terror'.94
Bencs, however, was revealing a growing confidence in the arguments he put forward
for reform. Earlier in the year, a fear that radicalism would re-emerge within the
MSZDP had been used to resist calls for a rapprochement. Now Bencs felt that he
could use such a danger to strengthen his call for negotiations. These concerns were
fuelled by the fact that the economy, which appeared to have begun to stabilize at the
beginning of the year, had again gone into sharp decline as the printing presses were
turned back on and inflation escalated.95

In a situation-report written in early November 1921 Bencs argued that
accelerated wage rises of twenty percent were not sufficient to keep up with inflation.
This deficiency, he claimed, would cause increasing dissatisfaction among the
workers who would therefore be liable to grow more politically active. While this
argument again linked political unrest not to internationalist and revolutionary
ambitions but to economic factors, the main thrust of the argument was that if
compromise was to be reached it was needed now.96 The national police chief echoed
these concerns about a possible re-emergence of agitation in a directive issued on 9

93 Macartney, October 15th, ii, p.42.
94 OLK, 808, 55, 2.
95 Romsics, Magyarország története a XX században, p.154.
96 OLK, 808, 70, 3.
November to all police forces and local officials. He demanded renewed vigilance and the use of all necessary measures to prevent disruptive influences.  

On 12 November 1921, Bencs outlined the second part of his argument for negotiations, clearly stating that the time had now come to take this step. His justified this by arguing that the MSZDP had reduced its demands to three core issues, each of which was capable of solution: an amnesty, the same rights as the liberal parties, and freedom for the press. As regards an amnesty, he argued that this ‘in substance had already happened’ since it would merely require the extension of the amnesty already given to the counter-revolutionaries in 1920. As regards equality with the liberals, this would be acceptable as long as the trade unions were kept out of politics and the MSZDP operated on the same basis as other parties. Finally, press freedom would require only that Hungarian law was made to coincide with international norms and the socialist press behaved responsibly. He concluded by stating that even if the demands needed further moderation, this was still a basis for negotiations.  

Bencs was not outlining a change in MSZDP policy. Peyer had made precisely these demands in Tatabánya in July, and the decision to focus on them now involved other motivations. The restraint of the MSZDP in Baranya and the reduction in industrial unrest was continuing evidence of the moderate nature of the MSZDP. Bethlen was also being driven by calculations of his own. Still without a party to support him and with a heavy legislative programme, including a new electoral law, to be forced through parliament, Bethlen was running out of time to resolve the socialist problem. Without ending the MSZDP’s parliamentary boycott his goal of a return to normality would appear illusory. Also his promises to reintroduce basic freedoms could not be postponed indefinitely. If, however, such freedoms were restored without obtaining some concessions from the MSZDP, then Bethlen would have thrown away one of his bargaining cards.

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97 Fejer County Archive, (hereafter FML), 401a, III, 27.
98 OLK, 808, 38, 35-36.
The three factors outlined above that were necessary for Bethlen to contemplate negotiations were now coming into place. The MSZDP had demonstrated its moderation and it had ceased its efforts to meddle with economic policy. Also it was now politically expedient for Bethlen to come to an agreement with the MSZDP.

Final Steps towards Negotiations

The MSZDP continued to demonstrate its new moderation. Another of its leaders, Gyula Peidl, returned to Hungary on 15 November 1921. The party was bitterly attacked by the communist emigration, a sure means of demonstrating that the MSZDP had split from bolshevism, confirmed by the party’s formal adoption of the Second International position on 4 December. The party also again demonstrated its support for ‘the national interest’, by loudly calling for Sopron to vote to remain in Hungary. Then on 8 December the MSZDP and the government finally reached agreement on how the AFOSZ should operate.  

The party also used a trade union conference, held on 4 December 1921, to clarify its demands. In particular it called for freedom of association and organization, the legalization of strike action, the restoration of the trade unions’ rights and property and an end to censorship, internment, discrimination, and military supervision of the mines. While this appeared to be a lengthy list, it did not contain unrealistic hopes of interfering in general economic policy and was general enough to allow for discussion and compromise on each of the points. It was also accompanied by a number of nationalist speeches with, for example, Vanczák declaring that ‘we always were Hungarians and Hungarians we remain’.  

In the final report before negotiations actually began, Bencs issued his strongest praise yet for the socialists, arguing that they had returned to their position of 1916 and were based on the Second International. He even turned perceptions of

99 Sipos, A szociáldemokrata szakszervezetek története, p.32; Gergely, A Keresztényszociálistak politikai szerepe az ellenforradalmi első éveiben, pp.492-493.
100 Budapesti Hirlap, 6 December, 1921.
the socialists’ role in the Räterrepublik on its head by arguing that they had
counterbalanced the communists and thus prevented the dictatorship being
strengthened. He also challenged the idea that Christian Socialism was preferable to
the socialist movement arguing that there were those in both socialist organizations
who had committed crimes under the Bolsheviks.\textsuperscript{101} This coincided with a shift in the
government’s approach to Christian socialism. Christian Socialism still received
financial backing from the government,\textsuperscript{102} and its meetings had been attended by
government figures.\textsuperscript{103} Nevertheless, the increasingly anti-government stance of its
political representatives in the legitimist KNEP, as well as government suspicion of
all union activities and the movements lack of popular support,\textsuperscript{104} strengthened the
convictions of those who felt that the government should focus on the MSZDP not on
the Christian Socialists.\textsuperscript{105}

The government response was the most positive so far. On 7 December, in his
first speech to parliament after the reformation of his government following Charles
IV’s coup attempt, Bethlen committed himself to a programme of reform. Declaring
that his aim was to make peace with the workers he laid out a platform that in large
part responded to the trade union conference’s demands. The exceptional powers
would be revised and only those which were ‘absolutely necessary’ would be
maintained; freedom of association and organization would be guaranteed; an
amnesty decree would be introduced; internment would not apply to those already
punished by the courts; accelerated criminal proceedings would stay only for the
communists; censorship would be ended even before a new press law was passed; a
committee would be established to deal with wage disputes; and military supervision
of the mines would end. Bethlen’s only specific requirements were ‘guarantees that

\textsuperscript{101} Nemes, Iratok, ii, p.247.
\textsuperscript{102} Nemes, Iratok, ii, p.49.
\textsuperscript{103} Pölöskei, Horthy és Hatalmi rendszere, p.157.
\textsuperscript{104} Gergely, ‘A Keresztszociálistak politikai szerepe az ellenforradalmi első éveiben’, p.254.
\textsuperscript{105} Gergely and Pritz, A trianoni Magyarország, p.59.
the work of the trade unions will not serve party political aims' and that the workers conduct propaganda in the national interest.106

This was almost a word for word response to the demands of the trade union conference. Bethlen had laid out a programme that offered the possibility for negotiation and compromise. The way it would be applied depended on the outcome of the negotiations he would now conduct with the MSZDP.

The December Agreement

The actual negotiations were conducted on six occasions between 8 and 21 December 1921, resulting in an agreed text signed by representatives of the MSZDP and the government.107 There is little information on how the negotiations developed, but we do know that problems emerged after the first meeting with Samu Jászai, the secretary to the trade union council, who opposed any continuation of negotiations. Only after the party leadership committee had met to consider, and reject, Jászai's objections was the MSZDP delegation authorized to continue negotiations.108 Later newspaper reports suggested that the entire delegation had entered the negotiations expecting little progress but that Bethlen was able to reassure the party of his good intentions.109 If so, a factor in this was almost certainly the cleverly timed censorship reform, which was introduced by decree on 10 December. It abolished the system of press controls, although the government retained the right to restrict or prevent the distribution of newspapers.110

The discussions were clearly biased in the government's favour. Bethlen, as well as representing the government, assumed the position of chairman [mindenkor

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106 Budapesti Hirlap, 8 December, 1921.
107 Although communist historians describe these negotiations as a 'pact' [paktum] it is a loaded word and both the government, the MSZDP and non-Marxist historians used the word 'agreement'.
108 Fehér, A Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt, p.203. (Péter Sipos claims that the only reason Jászai did not sign the agreement, was his absence from the final meeting. However Jászai's failure to attend any meetings after 8 December, supports Fehér's assertion that he was opposed to the entire process from the start. See Sipos, A szociáldemokrata szakszervezetek története, p.33)
109 Budapesti Hirlap, 22 December, 1921.
110 Romsics, István Bethlen, p.175.
elnöklő], although his exact authority to control the scope and extent of discussion remains unclear. The only other permanent representative of the government was the reform-minded Zoltán Bencs, whose duty it was to represent the prime minister's position. He was also entrusted with the important work of recording the minutes of the negotiations. Accompanying Bencs and Bethlen were those government ministers and officials whose area of responsibility was under discussion on a particular day. The permanent MSZDP representatives were listed as Peyer, Farkas, Miákits and Sándor Propper, although only the first three signed the final agreement. They began the discussions by putting forward their demands; the government responded to each point and then finally put forward its own list of demands.\footnote{OLK, 808, 38, 23-34.}

**MSZDP Demands**

The socialist representatives began by complaining about discrimination against their party and demanded as a first step a return to the pre-war rights of association. This was accepted by the government with a promise to remove the distinctions made between parties with and without parliamentary representation. This would allow the party to hold meetings where not only policy proposals could be put forward [beszámoló gyűlések] but also debates could also take place [politikai gyűlések]. The ban on open-air meetings, however, remained in force. The government also dealt with the question of permitting and supervising meetings with a number of clever compromises. While maintaining the principle that all meetings should be registered beforehand, it suggested that in Budapest this would be required only once, so long as the party met at the same time and place, whereas in the countryside the old system would remain. As regards police supervision, this would continue but would not be compulsory. This meant that the requirement for every meeting to be postponed until the authorities were available to supervise it was brought to an end. The government was therefore giving away just as much as was
necessary to produce agreement, while maintaining the notion that meetings required the authority's permission, were limited to certain locations, and could continue to be monitored.\textsuperscript{112}

As regards the trade unions, the MSZDP demanded that they should be able to operate freely, establish local branches without obstruction, and that the suspended trade unions be allowed to resume work and regain their confiscated property, so they could serve the cultural aims they were set up for. Since this already conceded that the unions would be non-political, the government's response was generally positive. Bethlen promised to grant them normal freedoms and restore their confiscated assets or provide compensation. There were, however, a number of conditions. A request to establish a local union branch could be rejected within the thirty days following the application, and an independent organization would have to be established, although the government promised to take a benevolent approach [jó akaratülag]. The suspended rail and postal unions would not be restored, while the railway workers could not be organized into a formal union and only a new journal, not concerned with politics, would be allowed to circulate among them. As regards the Printer's union, its re-establishment would be considered only after an inquiry by the interior and justice ministers. Also union meetings at the workplace had to occur at a regular time, were forbidden during working hours, could be monitored by the police, and would not be allowed to deal with politics. Unscheduled meetings also had to be announced beforehand, although the authorities could not prevent such meetings taking place.\textsuperscript{113}

Worthy of particular note is that overall the regulations concerning union meetings were more liberal than those for party meetings. By retaining the right to ban party meetings, the government was implicitly contemplating the use of such powers. The failure of the negotiations to lay out precisely the grounds on how this could occur, ensured that when disputes emerged on this question there was no

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.
guidance from the agreement. Furthermore, the failure to define precisely what constituted a political meeting, which the unions were supposed not to hold, at best relied on a somewhat misplaced confidence in the ability of the other side to offer an acceptable interpretation of these terms. At worst it provided an opportunity to abuse the vagueness of the agreement.

Neither the MSZDP nor the government sought to alter the agreement about the AFOSZ, which had been signed on 8 December.

The MSZDP now turned to the question of internment and police supervision. It argued that the injustice of the system was actually inspiring disturbance. They pointed to the example of Budapest and its environs where they claimed that 10,000 people had to appear before the authorities two to three times a week. This resulted in them being unable to work and thus ‘the bitterness contained within them is awoken’. This was a clever argument since it played on the government’s fear of social unrest. It did not, however, challenge the principle of internment and police supervision per se, thus allowing the government to put forward ways of minimizing the problem rather than removing it.

It was, therefore, agreed that the numbers affected would be reduced to an undefined ‘minimum’ and police supervision would not occur on working days. There was also a promise to end the old trick of interning people as soon as they served out their prison term. Specific concessions were also offered to the MSZDP, with a promise being made to review all cases of party members under supervision and release from internment those who the party took responsibility for. This was another clever move on Bethlen’s part. It recognized the distinction between the MSZDP and the communists and offered a concession that would only benefit the MSZDP, thus exacerbating this division. The chances of the liberals and communists attacking the MSZDP’s role in these negotiations and further dividing the opposition were, therefore, substantially increased.

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114 Ibid.
115 Ibid.
As regards press freedom, the minutes state that 'by way of the motion submitted [by the MSZDP delegates] the meeting states that the government has ended press censorship and herewith the freedom of the press has been re-established'. This was an extraordinary concession by the socialist delegates as it endorsed the rather dubious notion that the government's still formidable ability to restrict the sale of newspapers did not count as censorship. Thus the government was required to go no further than it had chosen to do so on 10 December and the controversial 1912 press law remained in force. There appear, furthermore, to have been no discussions about the government's much criticized influence on the MTI, nor about the issue of financial subsidies for newspapers, nor even about what precisely constituted press freedom. It therefore comes as little surprise that the government's later definition of censorship was not entirely liberal, with the interior minister declaring that although the freedom of the press would be respected he would censor any sign of 'revolutionary fever'.

The MSZDP also called for an amnesty, arguing that it would be 'a precondition of calm and political consolidation' and would demonstrate that 'the system of normal times had returned'. This was the same approach that the party had used in arguing for reforms of internment and police supervision, implying an amnesty would work in the government's favour, strengthen internal stability and aid foreign propaganda. The government agreed to this with sufficient qualifications to ensure that the amnesty was by no means comprehensive. Effectively, the amnesty would apply to all those sentenced to less than five years imprisonment, or less than 10 years in a civil court, for crimes committed during the Bolshevik dictatorship. This arrangement maintained the notion that the acquitted were still guilty and the MSZDP was implicitly accepting their guilt. There were also two important exceptions since

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116 Ibid.
117 Through the Kolportázs law the government continued to place restrictions on a number of opposition newspapers such as Áz Est and Világ, allowing them only to be bought by pre-paid subscription.
118 Új Barázda, 28 April, 1921.
119 Áz Ujság 25 January, 1922.
those convicted of crimes out of ‘avarice’ [nyereségvágyból] were excluded (again without defining what this meant), as were those who had gone abroad to avoid trial. In other words the émigrés, most of whom had been charged with some form of offence, remained in a difficult situation. Again, government concessions were also targeted at benefiting only the MSZDP. As regards those who had been convicted of press offences or agitation, only the cases presented by the party would be reviewed.\textsuperscript{120}

The promise of an amnesty was also used to resolve the MSZDP’s complaints about the use of accelerated judicial proceedings [gyorsított bírói eljárás]. These had effectively provided the courts with the right to pass sentence first and consider the evidence later. The government argued that such problems would be resolved by releasing those affected under the provisions of the amnesty, even though this would not apply to all cases and retained the impression that those affected had been guilty of something. The government also promised to pass a decree ending the use of such proceedings, although this was to occur at some unspecified time in the future. Indeed this measure as well as other exceptional wartime measures, which the government continued to utilize, was due to end in June 1922 anyway. The government did, however, promise to review Law LXIII of 1912, which had authorized the use of accelerated judicial proceedings.\textsuperscript{121}

The MSZDP also criticized the nationalization of workers insurance, arguing that this had led to the whole question ‘being brought down to the level of an unfeeling bureaucracy’. While the government was prepared to restore autonomy and reform provisions for the elderly, disabled, widows, orphans, domestic workers, farm workers and mine workers [bányatársadalak] it still insisted on retaining an interest in determining the level of insurance. There was also the promise of further negotiations on reforming Law XIX of 1907 relating to insurance for the mining industry. Additionally, the government promised to end military supervision of the mines and

\textsuperscript{120} OLK, 808, 38, 23-34.  
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
remove general restrictions on the Mineworkers’ union. Bethlen, however, also revealed his continuing mistrust of union action, declaring that the mines were so important the government would not tolerate any agitation which would endanger production.\textsuperscript{122}

Aware that the government would not tolerate specific interference in economic policy, the socialist delegates chose to put forward a series of general demands. They argued that there was a need to reintegrate the economy into Europe and bring inflation under control. Their main motivation was probably to ensure that the government focused on industrial rather than agrarian policy. As Bencs had noted in a situation report on 4 November, there was particular bitterness among the MSZDP that the government was doing little to control inflation.\textsuperscript{123} Concerns were also likely to have increased with the moves towards the formation of a unified governing party built on a Smallholder basis with a likely emphasis on agrarian issues. The MSZDP argued that industrial and agrarian policy needed to work in tandem since only after industry had been rebuilt could agricultural production be intensified.

The government’s response to such generalities was to respond in kind. It offered nothing specific beyond a promise to ‘do everything in its power to make, during these difficult times, the cost of living bearable’. Only as regards wage negotiations was there a new policy initiative - namely, the proposal that if agreement between employer and employees could not be reached, the next bill would propose the setting up of a committee [bíróság] to resolve such complaints. There was, however, no decision on who should staff such a committee or what precisely their remit would be.\textsuperscript{124}

Finally, the MSZDP called for the return of blocked union deposits and expressed their concern about the problems which some party and union journals were experiencing. The example given concerned the case of a journal disappearing

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{123} OLK, 808, 70.
\textsuperscript{124} OLK, 808, 38, 23-34.
while it was being distributed! Since the government had already agreed to the
legalization of union activities and the restoration of their property, the first demand
for a return of union deposits was immediately accepted. As regards the second
concern, since the government was naturally unwilling to take responsibility for
illegal interference in the distribution of journals, it promised only that it would
investigate specific cases.\textsuperscript{125}

Bethlen’s Demands

Then Bethlen put forward his demands. He called on the MSZDP to declare
that their interests were the same as those of nation and country, which would require
struggle and sacrifices. He also demanded that the socialists should act like the
German socialist party and never represent an enemy state’s point of view.\textsuperscript{126} Since
the socialist party, like all the parties of the former Habsburg empire, had always
drawn its ‘intellectual sustenance’ from the German socialists, Bethlen was requiring
something that was always likely to occur anyway.\textsuperscript{127} Indeed MSZDP leaders were
already pointing to the German example as a model for party-government relations.\textsuperscript{128}
Bethlen, however, also chose to clarify precisely what this meant. He demanded that
the party ‘refrain from any propaganda which damages Hungary’s interests’, and
refute accusations of terror ‘so that a suitably true picture of Hungary will be gained
abroad’. This was to be achieved by informing foreign socialists of the agreement, by
promoting Hungary’s interests through the foreign socialist press, and by an objective
Népszava operating in co-operation with the foreign ministry. Bethlen also demanded
that ‘relations with the emigration must be severed’.\textsuperscript{129}

Internally, so Bethlen went on, the MSZDP had to co-operate with the
bourgeoisie, [polgárok], to rebuild the country, refrain from political strikes, and rely

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{125} D.G. Kirby, War, Peace and Revolution, Aldershot, 1986, p.7.
\textsuperscript{126} This was a point Peyer had made in his speech at Tatabánya in July (see above).
\textsuperscript{127} OLK, 808, 38, 23-34.
on wage-agreement committees to resolve wage problems. Specifically he demanded that the party break from the liberal parties, what he termed bourgeois demagogy, [polgári demagogia], and the ‘octobrists’ who supported the principles of the Károlyi revolution. Beyond this, they were to use only ‘clean weapons’ against the government and not advocate republicanism.\(^{130}\)

Bethlen’s final demand was that the MSZDP would not use the reintroduction of the freedom of association ‘to extend its agitation to the agricultural workers - as they did in the countryside in the autumn of 1918’.\(^{131}\) The ambiguous nature of the phrasing has enabled communist historians to argue that the MSZDP was accepting their exclusion from the countryside, something that conveniently explained the MSZDP’s failure in subsequent elections to win more than a handful of agricultural seats.\(^{132}\) This, however, is not the only possible interpretation. It can be argued that only a particular form of agitation was being banned: not all agitation \textit{per se}. Indeed, recognition of the MSZDP’s right to organize in the countryside is suggested by the way that its founding of the \textit{Földmunkások Országos Szövetsége}, (Landworkers National Society), at Szentes on 2 October 1921, was officially greeted by an official from the agricultural ministry.\(^{133}\) The activity of such organizations remained unaffected by the agreement as the MSZDP made clear by declaring that they could ‘not give up the further continuation of the union work of the active organs of the agricultural association’.\(^{134}\)

It is also noticeable that this point cannot have been overwhelmingly important to the government. It was left out of the summaries of the agreement produced by Bencs in 1921 and 1925,\(^{135}\) and the report on the negotiations circulated

\(^{130}\) Ibid.

\(^{131}\) Hungarian text is ‘nem fogja agitációját a mezőgazdasági munkásrétegekre kiterjeszteni - mint ahogy 1918. öszen a vidéken tette’.


\(^{133}\) Dokumentumok a Szentesi munkásmozgalom történetéből, pp.86-87.

\(^{134}\) OLK, 808, 38, 23-34. This stands in direct contrast to the claim made in the official history of Hungary published in 1976 that the agreement required that the MSZDP ‘must stop the organization of the agricultural workers’. See Magyarország története, ii, p.449.

\(^{135}\) OLK, 808, 38, 37-38, 39-45; Nemes, Iratok, ii, pp.249-250.
by the foreign ministry.\textsuperscript{136} There is evidence that the government remained determined to prevent the MSZDP extending its agitation into the countryside with the interior minister, Klebelsberg, writing on 13 January 1922 to all főispáns that they should prevent this from occurring. There is no evidence, however, to suggest that this was done because of what was agreed in the negotiations. Indeed, it appears more likely Klebelsberg’s order was issued to counter the freedom of action in the countryside that the MSZDP appeared to have been granted by the December agreement.\textsuperscript{137} Certainly, the MSZDP’s activities in the countryside do not appear to correspond to claims that they had abandoned the countryside. Indeed they actually stepped up their organizational activities and contested 23 seats in rural areas in the 1922 parliamentary elections.\textsuperscript{138}

There are two, more plausible, reasons why Bethlen introduced this final demand into negotiations. First, it operated as a ‘guilt clause’, requiring the MSZDP to take responsibility for their activities in 1918 and confirm the party’s return to its pre-war position. Secondly, it enabled the government to take further action against socialist organizations in rural areas if they began to act in a revolutionary manner. It should not be regarded as a dramatic new restriction on the MSZDP’s right to operate in the countryside.

The negotiations concluded with the MSZDP accepting Bethlen’s demands to ‘establish the good name of the country with internal consolidation and economic prosperity’, and the decision that both sides would receive a copy of the minutes.\textsuperscript{139}

It is also worth noting that there was apparently some discussion around the edges of the negotiations which assured the MSZDP of a suitable number of seats in the forthcoming elections. The exact details of these negotiations remain, however,
unclear - they consist of a few hand-written notes filed with the government’s copy of the agreement.\footnote{OLK, 808, 38, unnumbered.}

Reaction to the Agreement

Almost immediately after its signing on 22 December the agreement began to be criticized. The signs of discontent, that had emerged as negotiations began, resurfaced when the socialist representatives presented the final agreement to the party’s leadership committee. Although Peyer and Farkas would later claim that the party had been kept fully consulted throughout the negotiations they received a hostile reception from the committee.\footnote{PTSA, 658.3, 259-265.} Complaints that the party had been effectively sidelined from the negotiations were reinforced by the threats of some unions to resign from the party. Although the agreement was finally accepted, the level of internal opposition was bound to affect its implementation.\footnote{Pölöskei, Horthy és hatalmi rendszere, p.183.}

In an attempt to deflect further criticism Népszava issued several commentaries on the agreement. These emphasized that the party had secured such concessions as an amnesty and the end of speeded up judicial proceedings.\footnote{Ibid., pp.183-184.} This however did nothing to satisfy the rest of the opposition. The communist party was especially furious at the concessions made and attacked the MSZDP’s failure to secure a full amnesty and a guarantee of free and fair elections. Even the social democratic émigrés, led by Emő Garami, criticized what had been achieved.\footnote{Serfőző, A MSZDP, pp.22-23.} Prominent liberals also joined the attack, citing the continuation of internment as a sign that the agreement had failed to fundamentally alter the situation.\footnote{An example of this was Vázsonyi’s withdrawal from the PMSZ on the grounds that one party - the MSZDP - had independently entered into negotiations with the government. Serfőző, A MSZDP, pp.35-36. See also Az Est, 1 January, 1922.}
Clearly taken aback by the hostility of this reaction, and aware of the need to shore up its credibility, the party reverted to its traditional populist line of criticising the government. In an interview with the *Az Ujság* newspaper, published on 1 January 1922, a leading, although unnamed, party representative attacked the government for not fulfilling its promises. Even worse he declared that 'we cannot talk about an agreement in the simple sense of the word'. A formal agreement was 'impossible because the social democratic party stands on the basis of its strictly defined, [meghatározott], programme'. He also stressed that 'the social democratic party maintains its freedom of action and will continue to put into practice that which is necessary'. Confusingly, he still held out the possibility of implementing at least a part of what had been agreed to, stating that the MSZDP would undertake propaganda abroad if the government made the necessary domestic changes.\(^{146}\)

The contradictions within this interview, the wish to deny the existence of an agreement while still pressuring the government to fulfil its side of the bargain, indicates the confused nature of party-thinking on this question. Apparently incapable of admitting that it had also promises to fulfil, the party instead seized every opportunity to criticise the government and demonstrate its continuing independence. On 13 January 1922, *Népszava* launched a fresh attack on the government for failing to carry out its reform programme and the trade unions declared their full support for the strikes which broke out in several Budapest factories.\(^{147}\) At a meeting of the AFOSZ to confirm the results of its leadership elections there was sharp criticism of the government’s new influence in the society and Peidl took the opportunity to launch another attack on the government.\(^{148}\)

The party line that was emerging continued to laud the achievements of the negotiations, claiming that 1500 socialists had been released from prison, but denied that that there had been any formal agreement.\(^{149}\) The subject also became less and

\(^{146}\) *Az Ujság*, 1 January, 1922.


\(^{148}\) *Az Est*, 24 January, 1922.

\(^{149}\) Réti, 'A Bethlen-Peyer paktum’, pp.63-64
less frequently discussed so that at the 1924 party conference, it was internal party critics who raised the issue while the leadership denied that there had been any agreement whatsoever. Only in December 1924, when Bethlen threatened to publish the minutes, did the party finally make the agreement public. This protracted denial was in itself a violation of one of the provisions of the agreement, which specifically required the MSZDP to outline their concessions at the next party conference, and to write articles in foreign socialist newspapers outlining the changes in the party’s position.

Historians’ Assessments of the Agreement

The historical view of the agreement has altered with the passing decades. Communist historians, always critical of social democrat moderation, attacked the party for negotiating with the government and conceding too much in return for too little. The orthodox Marxist view, presented by historians such as Nemes and László Réti, was that the MSZDP had accepted restrictions on its actions while legitimizing and therefore strengthening what was then perceived as a fascist regime.150 This approach was later moderated by historians such as Ferenc Pölöskei, who argued that, although not all the points were applied by both sides, it was still the government that really benefited from the agreement since it repositioned the party on a new and compliant basis.151 Contemporary historians now offer an alternative perspective. Romsics for example describes the agreement as being ‘based on a system of realistic mutual promises and concessions’ while Péter Sipos concentrates on the liberalizing measures the MSZDP had secured in the agreement.152

It is not, however, enough to discount earlier historical perspectives simply because they contain a particular political bias. Communist scepticism about the consequences of the agreement may be overstated but it also hits upon something

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150 Nemes, Iratok, ii, pp.60-61.
151 Pölöskei, Horthy és hatalmi rendszere, pp.184-186.
152 Romsics, István Bethlen, p.175; Sipos, A szociáldemokrata szakszervezetek története, p.34.
interesting. A number of points in the agreement were not fully applied. The government did not restore complete press freedom, continued to restrict the rights of association, and did not fulfil its promises on insurance reform until 1928, while the MSZDP did not split from the emigration, did not use its foreign influence to strengthen the Bethlen regime, and continued to work with the liberal parties. One can therefore hardly talk of ‘realistic promises and concessions’ when so many of the promises were not kept and so many of the concessions were offered only on paper.

An Assessment of the Agreement

The primary beneficiary of the agreement was Bethlen. He had doubly undermined the danger of a liberal-socialist coalition, which had emerged in early 1921. First by requiring the MSZDP to break with the liberals in the pact and secondly by persuading the MSZDP to enter into negotiations independently, without their liberal allies.

He also increased the likelihood that the MSZDP would participate in the 1922 elections. First, by appearing to remove their grievances and secondly by requiring them to act as a constructive, opposition party. Furthermore, the very likelihood of the MSZDP participating in the elections and challenging the hegemony of the conservative parties, lent weight to those calling for a unified conservative response to the socialist danger.

Bethlen also benefited by presenting himself as a reformist prime minister, who had introduced reforms and solved the ‘workers question’, therefore enhancing his appeal in the forthcoming parliamentary elections.

He had also achieved these outcomes, without offering any guarantees concerning franchise reform and a future electoral system. Furthermore the concessions Bethlen actually granted were generally vague, and could still be interpreted and exploited as he saw fit. He was also aware that the government’s

153 Pölöskei, Horthy és hatalmi rendszere, pp.184-186.
exceptional wartime powers would not last indefinitely, and he had promised to introduce reforms. The agreement therefore enabled Bethlen to secure concessions for reforms he had already promised.

The specific demands Bethlen made during the negotiations were also calculated to strengthen his position. Certain of his demands were deliberately unrealistic. For example, he demanded that the trade unions keep out of politics. However, the MSZDP had been formed and re-formed by the unions to represent union interests. Indeed, Bencs in a report on socialist links with the trade unions, written before the negotiations began, noted that the party derived its power from union funding and was absolutely inter-linked with the unions through the interchangeable nature of the two organizations leadership.\footnote{OLK, 808, 60.} The absurdity of seeking to separate the two entities was demonstrated by the fact that three of the MSZDP representatives who took part in the negotiations, Peyer, Miákits and Jászai, were themselves union leaders. Péter Sipos emphasizes this very point. He writes that ‘the social democratic political movement, from its leading bodies to its local branches, was built on the connections that had been established with the trade unions’.\footnote{Sipos, A szocialdemokrata szakszervezetek története, p.124. Nemes, Iratok, ii, p.251.}

The most likely explanation for why Bethlen made such demands was because he knew they were likely never to be met. They therefore provided a convenient excuse for reneging on his own concessions. Since the MSZDP could not realistically fulfil the promises it made in the negotiations, the government retained the freedom to decide how closely it would adhere to its own promises. In other words the whole process became something of a ‘get-out’ clause, which allowed Bethlen, when the time came, to go back on his own concessions. The changing language the government used to describe what had occurred indicates this. Although the first circular issued by the foreign ministry immediately after the negotiations described it as an ‘agreement’ [megállapodás]\footnote{Nemes, Iratok, ii, p.251.} a further circular in October 1922 stated that
there has been no discussion about an agreement [egyezmény] between the government and the social democratic party'.  

The MSZDP’s negotiating strategy actually allowed Bethlen to take this somewhat cynical approach. It entered into these negotiations because it did not trust the government to fulfil its earlier promises to introduce reforms. It should therefore have secured additional guarantees to ensure that the promises made by the government in the agreement would be applied. The agreement, however, included no timetable for implementing any concessions and no overseeing committee to ensure that such implementation took place. Even public opinion was prevented from holding both sides to account by the secrecy and misinformation that swiftly enveloped the whole proceedings. Such a position was naïve, capable of being exploited by Bethlen, and was always likely to lead to profound disillusionment with the government and the negotiating process.

Conclusion

The December agreement did not mark a real attempt by Bethlen to reach a new understanding with the MSZDP. He sought to secure political advantage from the agreement rather than produce a real rapprochement with the MSZDP. The boldness of his action in being the first Hungarian prime minister to seek to draw up a detailed agreement with the MSZDP should not distract attention from the fact that this remained a political tactic intended to strengthen Bethlen’s own position. His policy making throughout 1921 had gradually permitted some reforms but had also maintained repressive anti-socialist legislation where it was deemed necessary. Persuaded by his advisers, particularly Bencs, that an agreement would be in the government’s and the nation’s interest, and aware of the political benefits that could be accrued from a deal, Bethlen entered negotiations. Nevertheless, this in no way

158 Contemporary party viewpoints on the agreement are best summarized in Réti, ‘A Bethlen-Peyer paktum’, pp.63-68.
indicated that Bethlen was now prepared to embark on a reformist programme. He still retained the possibility of disregarding parts of the agreement and launching a renewed crackdown on the MSZDP, if he deemed it necessary.

The MSZDP by contrast had undergone a gradual change in its political outlook through 1920 and 1921. Within the constraints of its reformation in August 1919 it had gradually adopted a more moderate position and taken a more conciliatory approach to the government. Nevertheless, it continued to veer between a deep suspicion of Bethlen’s intentions, (requiring negotiations and a formal agreement to ensure Bethlen carried out his promises), and an almost naïve belief in Bethlen’s willingness to fully apply the generally vague promises he made in the agreement.

The resulting disillusionment within the MSZDP was already manifesting itself by January 1922. This encouraged the MSZDP to delay implementing its side of the agreement, increasing Bethlen’s mistrust of the MSZDP’s underlying intentions, and beginning a vicious cycle of mutual suspicion, recrimination and increasing hostility.

Had the agreement been immediately published, then some form of détente could have been enforced by public pressure. Even if the agreement had contained some form of timetable for implementation, then there might have been a momentum towards either implementation or abandonment. There was, however, no timetable in the agreement, and the MSZDP only admitted its existence at the end of 1924. The way in which the agreement was, therefore, framed, actually became the first reason why relationship between the two sides would deteriorate from 1922 onwards. Bethlen had demonstrated his political skill in constructing this agreement, exploiting the weaknesses of the MSZDP. This price paid for this success was, however, that he lost the opportunity to secure a lasting accommodation with the MSZDP.
Chapter 3 – The 1922 Elections

Introduction

Elections are yardsticks by which the regimes that emerge from them can be measured. They can be used to provide governments with authority and legitimacy, and they help define the government and opposition parties. The Hungarian parliamentary elections of 1922 are a case in point. Bethlen’s victory in these elections marked another stage in the development of the Unified Party. It also helped define the nature of the opposition he would encounter in the next parliament and beyond.

To fully understand the 1922 elections we need to break the electoral process into its component elements. Therefore this chapter will begin by outlining the need for a re-examination of these elections. It will then proceed to consider how Bethlen prepared for electoral victory. It will analyse how the electoral franchise was constructed and operated, and go on to discuss whether the electoral outcome was determined by the methods of voting involved. This article will also discuss the way the popularity and organizational strengths of both the Unified Party and the opposition parties contributed to their respective success or failure, while also considering to what extent corruption and abuse played a part in influencing the electoral process. Finally there will be a consideration of how candidate-selection procedures influenced the composition of the newly-elected parliament.

Historians’ Assessments of the 1922 Elections

Communist historians were always unlikely to regard electoral questions as particularly important. The idea of a popular, pre-communist government was ideologically unacceptable to historians of this conviction. In their view, Bethlen’s conservatism could only appear to have gained the support of the nation if Bethlen
had succeeded in manipulating the electoral process. Thus their research either focused on revealing the methods of such manipulation or simply dismissed the outcome of these elections in a few paragraphs. Such historians regarded only the MSZDP’s role in these elections as being worthy of detailed consideration.

Some foreign historians also followed the Marxist line. Batkay regarded the 1922 elections as simply an element of Bethlen’s strategy for party formation. He argued that, as the government determined the extent of the franchise and the methods of voting; the actual ballot ‘was of minimal significance’. According to this view not only the actual voting but even the role of other parties was unworthy of serious consideration.

Since 1990 the opportunity to fully access the archives and write without obvious ideological constraint has not resulted in a full re-evaluation of the 1922 elections. Romsics’s biography of Bethlen devotes only five pages to the election. Hubai has provided further analysis on inter-war elections contributing fresh statistical analysis but only minimal interpretation. There is therefore a need for a thorough re-evaluation of these elections.

Creating a New Electoral System

In preparing for the 1922 elections Bethlen needed to accomplish three tasks. First he needed a broad-based conservative party, led by himself, with which to contest the elections. In Chapter One we saw how he secured this outcome with the creation of the Unified Party. He also needed to ensure that the MSZDP engaged in the elections. This would help ensure that the elections would be regarded as legitimate, would enable him to claim credit for bringing the MSZDP back into mainstream politics, and would help frighten conservative voters into voting for his party as a bulwark against socialism. In the second chapter we saw how he achieved

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1 Batkay, Authoritarian Politics p.54.
2 Romsics, István Bethlen, pp.177-181.
3 See for example Hubai, ‘A szociáldemokrata párt részvétele a választásokon’.
this. His final task was to create a new electoral system which would be regarded as legitimate and would also help secure the necessary majority for his party in the next parliament.

The previous franchise used in the 1920 elections had been recommended by the League of Nations as part of the price for accepting the overthrow in August 1919 of the Peidl trade-union government. Passed by a decree of the regent Horthy, the so-called 'Friedrich franchise' enfranchised 39.5% of the population, introduced the universal secret ballot, and was valid for two years. It was presumed that the new parliament would pass this, or another franchise, into law.

Bethlen and large sections of conservative opinion disliked this franchise. They regarded it as having been imposed on Hungary and therefore lacking constitutional legitimacy, and containing, (overly liberal), provisions which were blamed for having led to the disordered and faction-ridden parliament of 1920-1922. As we have seen in chapter one, in the last weeks of the parliament, Bethlen introduced a new franchise bill but its passing was prevented by filibustering and a lack of broad parliamentary support. On 16 February 1922, the MPs' mandates expired, as did the previous franchise, but there was no new franchise on the statute books.

Bethlen needed to find a different way of conferring constitutional legitimacy upon his franchise bill. His solution was to persuade Horthy to summon on 21 February a special constitutional committee. Three senior prelates of the Catholic church in Hungary, the speaker of Parliament and a retired justice minister, all declined to attend. In their absence the committee consisted of Protestant bishops, the presidents of the Curia, courts, land agency and royal court in Budapest, a lawyer for the crown, two further retired justice ministers, a retired state secretary, the head of the Budapest lawyers' chamber, a university rector, and two professors. Also in attendance were Bethlen and his cabinet colleagues, Tomcsányi and Klebelsberg, as well as Horthy's cabinet secretary.4

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The precise membership of the committee is worth noting for they were clearly not willing pawns of the government but they also in no way represented all the various social groups and viewpoints existing in the country at this time. Bethlen even sought to play down the committee’s authority by declaring it to be merely a 'public inquiry'.

The committee's choice was among three options: to authorize the continued use of the 1920 franchise, to authorize the use of the 1918 electoral law which had never been applied, or to allow the government to determine a new franchise. To the surprise of no one, it chose the final possibility by a vote of twelve to two and gave, (in the words of a 1935 official report to the government on the 1922 elections), a ‘free hand’ to the government.

The committee had some legal basis for rejecting the 1920 franchise for it was clearly a temporary measure intended to be used only for two years. It had also been superseded by Law 1 of the newly elected parliament of 1920, which invalidated all previous legislation passed after October 1918. The committee in its conclusions used both these justifications.

Yet the logical result of such a decision would have been to authorize the use of the 1918 electoral law. Unfortunately this solution, as Bethlen put it to Hohler, the British representative in Budapest, was impossible: the franchise would be too severely restricted. It appears that the committee was aware of the opposition such a decision would arouse and therefore passed the responsibility on to the government. Such a willingness by the government to use legal and social arguments without accepting the pre-eminence of either is again demonstrated by Bethlen's claim to Hohler that the Friedrich franchise also had to be abandoned because it lacked both legal authority and popular support. Thus the government used the committee's decision, and the veneer of constitutional respectability which it lent, to enforce its
own franchise proposals, passing them into law by a decree of the Regent on 2 March 1922.

It seems that the government was quite simply prepared to use what was necessary to achieve its objective of forcing through the electoral law. The law itself had already been drawn up, determined, and placed before the cabinet on 24 January, thus prejudging the decision of the constitutional committee. Indeed, in his explanation to the cabinet of the need for a new electoral franchise on 24 January, the interior minister Klebelsberg was already referring to the unacceptability of the Friedrich franchise on the grounds that it would be the most liberal in Europe and that in any case the Regent was demanding an open ballot.

Even more controversial than the manner in which it was introduced were the actual contents of the new electoral decree. Voters were required to have been Hungarian citizens for ten years and to have been continually resident in the same locality for two years, since the last census in 1920 was to be used to determine the voters' electoral district. Men had to be twenty-four years of age and women thirty years - a discrepancy absent from the initial draft proposals, which had raised the earliest voting age for both sexes to thirty years. Men were also required to have completed the fourth year of basic school and women the sixth year, although this could be relaxed to the completion of the fourth year if they had access to private personal income, had three or more children, were a widow, or had completed higher education. Men were also entitled to vote at any age if they had won the Károly cross, (a military award), were bronze, silver or gold members of the Vitézi Rend, (an officially-sponsored veterans' organization), had completed higher education, or had been enfranchised in 1918.

The electoral decree also raised the number of electoral districts from 219 to 245, removed dwarf districts with less than a thousand voters, made alterations to take

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10 OLK, 27, Mt.jkv, 24 January, 1922.
11 Ibid.
13 OLK, 468, B/1, 91.
into account the new borders (Sopron, Baranya county) and reallocated a total of six MPs to Budapest and the larger cities. The open ballot was restored in 195 rural districts; the secret ballot was to be used in the remaining 50 urban districts. The list voting system was to be used in Budapest and its environs, where four large districts were created electing thirty MPs. This form of proportional representation allocated seats in these districts on the basis of the various parties' share of the vote. The other 215 districts elected one candidate each by a first-past-the-post system in which, if no candidate secured more than 50% of the votes in the initial ballot, the two strongest candidates advanced through to a second round of voting.

Klebelsberg justified these changes on the grounds that they would not abandon the 'democratic direction' and indeed were only a 'transition' to a 'new basis' which maintained political stability and was simple enough to win legal authorization. In fact, the new legislation with its differences between open and secret ballots, male and female voters and its long list of exceptions was considerably more convoluted than the Friedrich franchise. It also did not easily win legal authorization; it was not passed into law until 1925. Even the cabinet expressed concerns, although not about the numbers enfranchised (or disenfranchised), but rather about the discrepancies between male and female voters and the return of the open ballot. The explanations offered by the government for these changes threw little light on the reasoning behind them.

As for the male-female discrepancy, Klebelsberg began by justifying this on the grounds that women were immature and unsuitable for political influence, yet the Friedrich franchise providing the vote for women could not be completely undone. When challenged on this point Klebelsberg responded that rural feeling regarded this as important. For Vass this was a misjudgement since while accepting that women had tended to vote against the old Smallholder Party in 1920 they would, he believed,

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15 Sturm, Almanach, pp.84-91.
17 OLK, 27, Mt.jkv, 24 January, 1922.
18 Ibid.
now vote on conservative lines. The agricultural minister also rejected Klebelsberg’s argument. He claimed that any discrepancies between the sexes would evoke social anger. Bethlen however defended Klebelsberg noting that, as there were gender discrepancies in England there was no need to be more liberal in Hungary.

Such arguments demonstrate the lack of consistency in the government's approach. It remains unclear whether the motive was a lack of faith in women, pressure from the countryside, a fear of being more liberal than England, or a cynical calculation that women were more likely to vote for opposition parties and therefore the fewer votes they had the better. The same opacity of arguments can be found in the government's justification for the reinstatement of the open ballot, which was defended in cabinet on the grounds that the regent demanded it, that the bureaucracy was no longer corrupt, and that party structures needed strengthening before a secret ballot could be reintroduced.

Analysis of the Franchise

Historians have sharply criticized this franchise, finding the government's arguments unconvincing. For Batkay, the new electoral system was clearly a means of putting administrative, economic, social, and physical pressure on the electorate, and Janos sums up the general conclusion of most historians that Bethlen was now able to 'fix the elections'. In terms of the total numbers of those who could now vote, their numbers had been reduced from 3,042,000 in 1920 to 2,381,598 and the open ballot was now unique in all of Europe.

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19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, p.60.
23 Janos, The Politics of Backwardness, p.211.
24 Nemes, Iratok. ii, p.256.
25 The distribution of seats also appears to have been weighted in favour of the Unified Party. Constituencies in Budapest, where the opposition parties had strong support, had almost a third more voters than the average elsewhere. See Hubai, 'Választók és választási jog', p.113.
There is, though, a way to see the reform in a more generous light. As Andrew Janos concedes, the pre-war electorate of 6% had been raised to 29.5%, while Romsics points out that the percentage of the adult population enfranchised was now higher in Hungary than in France (28%), or Greece (26%), and comparable to the proportion enfranchised in Belgium, Switzerland and Italy. Another sign of the franchise’s relative generosity was that this would be the first election in which the MSZDP would obtain political representation in the parliament. Moreover, as Hubai points out, with the population becoming increasingly better educated, over time the numbers enfranchised could be expected to increase, rising in this manner to 33.8% of the adult population by 1935. Furthermore, in the initial civil-service drafts of the franchise, the duration of the open ballot was fixed at two elections, implying that the government saw it as only a temporary measure to aid political and social stabilization.

Unfortunately historians have been less open minded in their views of the open ballot. Without engaging in a serious consideration of the precise effect of the open ballot, it has been condemned as a crude measure to intimidate opposition voters, as they would be unwilling to vote openly against the government for fear of retribution. Hubai for example simply states that the open ballot brutally damaged political freedoms by allowing the administration to punish those who voted against the Unified Party.

There are, however, a number of points that need to be considered. First, there is no guarantee that in secret ballot elections the administration cannot expose opposition voters to government retribution. Any bureaucracy has opportunities to discover and reveal information about the electorate. Responsibility for free and fair elections lies as much with those who oversee the electoral process as it does with the particular electoral system itself. In America, for example, the use of the secret ballot

26 Janos, The Politics of Backwardness, p.211.
27 Romsics, Magyarország a XX. században, pp.222-223.
29 OLK, 468, B/1, 91.
was unable to prevent electoral corruption which was still occurring in cities like Chicago as late as 1964.\textsuperscript{31} The American historian J. Kousser even argues that the secret ballot, by necessity requiring an ability to read and comprehend the ballot paper, actually discriminates against illiterate voters.\textsuperscript{32}

Secondly, in the case of the Hungarian 1922 elections there is almost no evidence of retribution against opposition voters. In Komárom, the főispán asked that three teachers who had supported the MSZDP should be removed from their posts, but in any case all three were known party activists.\textsuperscript{33} There were also cases where retribution was threatened by some candidates, but it is difficult to say how influential they were. In Edelény, Baron Radvánszky threatened his workers with trouble if they refused to support him, yet he still failed to obtain the required number of signatures to stand as a candidate.\textsuperscript{34} In Lovasberény, the főispán reported that the victorious candidate for the party led by Károly Rassay had warned that he would burn the houses of those who voted against him, although one of those making the allegation was paid 2000 crowns for his statement.\textsuperscript{35} It seems in any case unlikely that hundreds or thousands of voters in district after district could successfully be intimidated with threats of punishment, let alone actually punished, without the whole matter coming to national if not international attention. The occasional report of a candidate attempting to threaten prospective voters does not alter that point.

Thirdly, if the possibility of retribution was unlikely, is it really possible that a groundless fear shaped voting intention? This is undoubtedly harder to prove but it seems strange that voters, supposedly fearful of appearing to be anti-government, were quite willing to attend the most public demonstrations of support for opposition candidates - the open air rallies. In report after report, the MSZDP reported good

\textsuperscript{31} For a general overview of American electoral corruption see George Benson, Political Corruption in America, Lexington, 1978.
\textsuperscript{32} J. Morgan Kousser, The Shaping of Southern Politics, Yale, 1974, pp.50-60.
\textsuperscript{33} OLK, 26, XXXVII, 5472.
\textsuperscript{34} PTSA, 658.5, 13-34.
\textsuperscript{35} FML, I, 11, 13.
attendance for candidates’ meetings and speeches and there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that voters were afraid of attending such events.\footnote{PTSA, 658.5, 13-34, 60,75.}

Laszló Hubai has sought to demonstrate that the open ballot reduced opposition support. He points to the example of Sopron which, as a secret ballot seat, elected a MSZDP candidate in 1922 but reverted back to the open ballot in 1926 with the MSZDP candidate obtaining only 350 votes.\footnote{Hubai, ‘Választók és választási jog’, p.110.} The problem with this is that it overlooks all other contributory factors, including the MSZDP’s drop in popularity which led to the loss of 11 seats nationwide, and ignores the point that simply to stand in the 1922 elections 10% of the electorate must have signed the form nominating the MSZDP candidate. It is difficult to imagine that these voters were also intimidated in 1926 by the resumption of open ballot voting.

Ultimately, the fact that even in open-ballot districts a third of the electorate voted against the government demonstrates that intimidation is unlikely to have played a significant role in shaping voting behaviour. It seems highly improbable that retribution could have been threatened, let alone enforced, against a third of the rural electorate. A more probable effect of the open ballot was to encourage voters to support larger parties which had a greater chance of victory, but other then this it seems at the very least that the influence of the open ballot has been very much exaggerated.

Overall the government’s new franchise bill comes across as something of a compromise between political expediency and various vague and poorly thought out principles. It was not, however, a means by which to rig the election. Nevertheless, although this franchise was a marked development on the pre-war system of voting, it still contained the in-built bias towards producing a dominant conservative-orientated government. In that sense it indicated that another element of the Tisza system had been reconstructed.
Government Abuses - Corruption

A key element of the Tisza system, and the governing party constructed by the Tiszas, was the inter-linking of the party with the administration. The use of judicious appointments, patronage, and a willingness to sack any opposition-supporting officials ensured that the administration acted in the governing party’s interest. As Janos puts it, all this ‘had been known in Hungarian politics before. But in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, such methods of influencing electoral outcomes were institutionalized and became routine. [The governing party] and the administrative bureaucracy were welded into a single, powerful machine’.\(^{38}\)

Even after the turmoil of 1918-1919, key-aspects of this system remained in place. While Bethlen did not choose to occupy the interior ministry post, he reserved it for his most trusted allies. He first appointed Gedeon Ráday, like Bethlen independent of party affiliations, then Klebelsberg, a leader of the so-called ‘dissident’ grouping, whose members were among Bethlen’s strongest supporters. Nevertheless, as we saw in chapter one, Bethlen had been unable to fully assert control over the administration before he had created the Unified Party. Now, with the electoral process underway, Bethlen could finally move to assert control over the administration. Szinai and Szücs argue that Bethlen was aided in this respect by the főispáns growing willingness to commit themselves to the government, after it became clear that the legitimists were increasingly unlikely to restore Charles IV and install a new regime.\(^{39}\)

Bethlen did not, however, rely only on such opportunism. He was prepared to act ruthlessly to ensure that only the most trusted figures occupied senior administrative positions. In early March a purge of the főispáns was conducted with twelve of them being replaced.\(^{40}\) The főispáns were then ordered to provided


\(^{39}\) Szinai and Szücs, *Titkos iratai*, p.16.

\(^{40}\) Szőzat, 7-14 March, 1922.
information on opposition candidates,\textsuperscript{41} to distribute pamphlets,\textsuperscript{42} to help organize the party,\textsuperscript{43} and to assist Unified Party candidates in drawing up their local manifestos.\textsuperscript{44} At least one foispán even directly informed his staff that they could only agitate and vote for the Unified Party candidate.\textsuperscript{45} The interlinking of party and administration was further confirmed by Bethlen’s choice for his first campaign speech, which took place at the ceremonial inauguration of a new foispán in Miskolc.\textsuperscript{46} The foispáns were even taken on a boat trip to celebrate the Unified Party’s election victory.\textsuperscript{47} Not only the foispáns openly acted in the Unified Party’s interest. In Hódmezővásárhely, the local police captain actually appeared on the speaker’s platform at a Unified Party meeting (although at least he declined from making a speech).\textsuperscript{48}

There is also sufficient evidence to suggest that, at least in certain cases, the government was ordering direct administrative corruption. Bethlen wrote on 3 June to the foispán of Tolna County urging him to commit everything in support of ‘our’ candidates and offering him a further half-a-million crowns if his available money was insufficient for the purpose.\textsuperscript{49} On the same day Bethlen was also advised to encourage the administrators of Dombóvár district to ensure opposition-supporting railway workers were out of the district on election day, and to modify the neutrality of an election judge.\textsuperscript{50}

However, the local administration’s primary means of influencing the electoral outcome was its ability to obstruct the work of opposition candidates. For example, in Baranya County, eight opposition meetings were banned. In Arad county, three opposition meetings were banned and an opposition candidate was forced to alter his speech. In Békés county, the opposition had a total of nine of its meetings

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{OLK149} OLK, 149, 22, 10.
\bibitem{OLK26} OLK, 26, 1275, 4249.
\bibitem{FMLI70} FML I, 70, 25.
\bibitem{Ibid} Ibid.
\bibitem{JenoGombosGyula} Jenő, Gömbös Gyula, p.124.
\bibitem{FMLI7026} FML I, 70, 26.
\bibitem{OLK468B181} OLK, 468, B/1, 181.
\bibitem{NemesIRATOK} Nemes, Iratok, ii, pp.292-293.
\bibitem{SzinaiAndSzucs} Szinai and Szücs, Titkos iratok, p.89.
\end{thebibliography}
banned, one electoral leaflet withdrawn, one candidate arrested, and one banned from an electoral district for five years.\textsuperscript{51} Perhaps the most extreme example was when, on 1 June, the national press office reported that the főszołgabíró in Retsay district wanted to arrest an opposition candidate, could not find him, and arrested his secretary instead.\textsuperscript{52}

The conduct of the administration in these elections, therefore, strongly supports the view of historians such as Macartney and Batkay, who argue that it was now acting as an extension of the Unified Party apparatus.\textsuperscript{53} Bethlen had succeeded in using these elections to inter-link the party and administration, and further reconstruct the governing party model of the Tisza system.

We should, however, be wary about overestimating the influence of the administration on the outcome of these elections. The Jogvédő Liga, (League for the Defence of the Law), argued that the level of corruption made the calling of fresh elections necessary. It was, however, comprised solely of opposition politicians and its claim must be regarded in part as a political tactic.\textsuperscript{54}

It is worth noting that even some, albeit unofficial, Unified Party candidates had their meetings disrupted and were punished by the authorities.\textsuperscript{55} Also, although some opposition meetings were banned, a large majority proceeded without disruption. In the constituency of Feled (Borsod county), the local branch of the MSZDP reported that one of its planned meetings was prevented due to procedural irregularities, but it also noted that six other meetings had taken place in May alone.\textsuperscript{56} It is also possible that in certain cases meetings were prevented for legitimate reasons.

In the constituency of Ipolyszálka (Nógrád county) the MSZDP dismissed the authority's reason for banning one meeting because security could not be guaranteed, but then reported that another of its meetings that day had been attacked by right-wing

\textsuperscript{51} OLK, 149, 10, 10-11, 51-53, 88-90.
\textsuperscript{52} OLK, 35, 1, c.
\textsuperscript{53} Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, pp.42-43.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{55} FML, I, 11, 4-8.
\textsuperscript{56} PTSA, 658.5, 60.
extremists. The interior ministry also made efforts to restrain any over-enthusiasm, ordering on 13 January that all meetings that did not endanger the state should be permitted. Endangering the state was, however, defined in March 1922 as including criticisms of the regent, calls for land redistribution, and any discussion concerned with criminal law and the tax system.

On balance, it seems that corruption did occur and that the government exploited its control over elements of the administration. To suggest, however, as some historians are wont to claim, that every official was working for the Unified Party is, to say the least, unproven. It would also be an exaggeration to state that the Unified Party secured its victory by means of bureaucratic manipulation. There is no evidence to suggest that there was the same scale of corruption as occurred prior to 1914. Still, the claim made by Klebelsberg that the bureaucracy was now honest and impartial cannot be sustained. Any analysis of the 1922 elections does need to consider the role played by the administration in securing the Unified Party's victory.

Other Electoral Abuses

Bethlen also used semi-official societies to increase the likelihood of a Unified Party victory. For example, he directed the finance minister Kállay to provide the General Consumers Co-operative (AFOSZ) with 1,044,852 crowns to cover 'election expenses'. He claimed it was 'not necessary to question the necessity because it was beneficial' to the party. The Magyar Asszonyok Nemzeti Szövetsége, (Hungarian Women's National Society), which published four newspapers, was described as

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57 PTSA, 658.5, 75.
58 VML, IV, 401a.
59 FML, I, 11, 17.
60 Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, p. 42; Macartney, October 15th, i, pp. 48-49.
61 Even the leading socialist party newspaper Népszava claimed in June 1922 that bureaucratic corruption had cost the MSZDP perhaps as little as eight seats. See Serfőzö, A MSZDP, p. 66.
63 OLK, 27, Mt. kkv, 24 January 1922.
64 OLK, 468, B/1, 207.
providing ‘strong but invisible propaganda’ in the elections, and was rewarded for its efforts with 80,000 crowns, a considerable quantity of cheap paper from the culture ministry, and financial support for moving its offices.\textsuperscript{65} It is extremely difficult to ascertain how influential these organizations actually were, but the very fact that they received financial support suggests that they were thought possible of playing a part in securing the government’s electoral victory.

Other forms of government influence were less subtle. Bethlen’s attempt to involve religious leaders on the panel which authorized the new franchise was a dangerous blurring of religious and political lines, and for that reason Catholic Church leaders declined to attend.\textsuperscript{66} Bethlen went even further when he directly appealed to religious leaders to intervene on behalf of the party. On 12 February Bethlen wrote to the Catholic Prince Primate of Hungary encouraging him to persuade the clergy in five districts to support the Unified Party’s work.\textsuperscript{67} Then, on 27 March, he wrote to the Protestant Bishop, László Ravasz, to persuade one of his clergy to resign his candidacy opposing a Unified Party candidate, on the dubious grounds that an electoral struggle would endanger the district.\textsuperscript{68} Bethlen also sought to neutralize the activities of Bishop Dezso Balthazár, who had voiced criticisms of the government, seeking to delay the provision of a visa for the bishop's trip to America until April so that he would be out of the country at election time.\textsuperscript{69} It would however be an exaggeration to suggest that there is evidence to point towards either a general pattern of government pressure on the churches or broad co-operation between religious denominations and the government.

The government also sought to influence the press. Some historians have focused on the fact that the government closed down only a few newspapers. Janos claims that overall the press retained its ‘corporate autonomy and freedoms’.\textsuperscript{70} Others

\textsuperscript{65} OLK, 468, B/1, 1200, 1243.
\textsuperscript{66} Nemes, Iratok, ii, p.272.
\textsuperscript{67} Szinai and Szűcs, Titkos iratok, p.85.
\textsuperscript{68} OLK, 468, B/1, 382.
\textsuperscript{69} OLK, 64, 10, 70, 5.
\textsuperscript{70} Janos, The Politics of Backwardness, p.216.
such as Batkay, Romsics and Hubai simply ignore the issue. Even the Marxist historians, intent on uncovering any information capable of discrediting the Bethlen government, appear to have in general overlooked the question. There was, however, a systematic effort by the government to ensure that the press supported the Unified Party.

The emergency powers introduced by decree 4578 of 1920 and still in effect, required government authorization for all new newspapers. Responsibility for assessing all applications lay with the head of the prime minister’s press office, Tibor Eckhardt, a man sufficiently extremist to later join Gömbös’s right-radical party. As a matter of routine, Eckhardt requested information on the backgrounds and political sympathies of aspiring editors. In the months leading up to the election he rejected the applications of former communists, Jews, a paper linked to Bishop Balthazar, and several papers simply because they were ‘not desirable on the grounds of public interest’.

The government also sought to influence existing newspapers. On 15 December 1921, Eckhardt ordered all government departments to use only newspapers which unconditionally supported the ‘national interest’ [nemzeti érdek], and by 1922 the government was making direct payments to newspapers. In April, Bethlen ordered the payment of 10,000 crowns to a newspaper in Hódmezővásárhely which had published his manifesto and during May and June seven főispáns reported that they had made payments to publications in their counties. The főispán in Vas county, reported in June that he had been making payments to all but one newspaper in his district even though this involved providing financial support for publications which supported the opposition. Papers which continued to agitate

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71 OLK, 26, 1273, 1333.  
72 OLK, 26, 1273, 2635.  
73 OLK, 26, 1273, 1799.  
74 OLK, 26, 1271, 137.  
75 OLK, 26, 1272, 7662.  
76 OLK, 26, 1274, 3287.  
77 OLK, 26, 1275, 4203-4214.  
78 VML, IV, 401a.
against the government had their funding stopped.\textsuperscript{79} So much money was being paid out that the főispán of Nógrád County reported in May that two newspapers had still not spent all the money he had given them in March.\textsuperscript{80}

The government also exploited the censorship laws to tap the telephones of leading opposition figures and newspapers, though it is difficult to ascertain precisely how sophisticated this level of monitoring actually was.\textsuperscript{81}

All this is not to say that the opposition itself did not also use dirty tricks. For example, the főispán of Tolna County reported that in Szepes district an opposition candidate used false telegrams to suggest that prominent persons supported him.\textsuperscript{82}

When we look at the numbers of successful candidates who were petitioned against for electoral irregularities, we find that although this occurred for ten of the 143 Unified Party MPs, it also occurred for fifteen of one hundred opposition MPs including three MSZDP MPs.\textsuperscript{83} The process of determining whether a candidate had unfairly secured election was, however, flawed because the principle used was not whether corruption had occurred, but whether sufficient corruption had occurred to alter the result of the election.\textsuperscript{84} Of those petitioned against, only two MPs, both opposition members, had their mandates overturned, although this may also have been partly due to the fact that the Unified Party held four of the seven places in each of the four committees set up to monitor the petition process.\textsuperscript{85}

Overall we can conclude that a significant amount of electoral abuse took place in these elections. Most of it occurred on a systematic level since the administration was expected to use its resources to support the Unified Party. This cannot, however, provide the entire explanation for a Unified Party victory. We also need to consider the reasons for the genuine popularity of the Unified Party and the weaknesses of the Opposition parties.

\textsuperscript{79} OLK, 26, 1274, 3906.
\textsuperscript{80} OLK, 26, 1275, 4865.
\textsuperscript{81} Szinai and Szűcs, Titkos iratok, pp.102-103.
\textsuperscript{82} OLK, 149, 19, 37.
\textsuperscript{83} Sturm, Almanach, pp.78-79.
\textsuperscript{84} Ruszoly, Választási biráskodás, p.38.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., pp.9-10.
The Unified Party Programme

On 22 February Bethlen appointed Gömbös, the party’s deputy president, to organize the election campaign. Gömbös was a useful choice for the post, for it was reassuring to the Smallholders to have an old party member in such an important position and reassuring to Bethlen as Gömbös was personally much closer to his political views than to any guiding principle of the old Smallholder Party. Under Gömbös’s direction, the party proceeded to publish a detailed 31-point manifesto that moved it beyond a simple coalition of interests intent on securing victory and gave it a reasonably broad appeal.

In part the manifesto appeared reformist. It demanded a progressive tax system, equal rights for national minorities, a reduced bureaucracy, and the provision of accident and health insurance. In part it appears conservative, as it aimed at full territorial revision, education based on religious morals, and the reconstruction of the country on a Christian basis. Beyond all this, it was also something of a compromise, calling for a second house of parliament but on a modern basis and the restoration of the monarchy but only after a plebiscite had been conducted. Most noticeable, however, is the appeal to agricultural voters. Thirteen of the thirty-one points were directly focused on the countryside, ranging from a promise of further land reform to lower taxes on tobacco products and a refusal to allow foreigners to buy Hungarian land. Only three points related directly to industrial, commercial or urban workers’ concerns.

In summary, then, the manifesto was a skilful exercise in representing the different philosophies within the party, producing a document with broad national appeal.

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86 OLK, 35, 1, dosszié c.
87 Szinai and Szűcs, Titkos iratai, p.14.
88 The language used, Keresztény-Keresztény, implied a unified Catholic-Protestant basis but decidedly not Jewish.
89 All information on the Unified Party programme comes from Sturm, Almanach.
appeal and focusing on the 195 agricultural constituencies that would dominate any future parliament.

Occasionally Bethlen also pointed in his campaign speeches to the achievements of his government such as the relocation of the universities, the re-introduction of freedoms, the recognition of the trade unions, the liberation of Pécs, and return of Sopron. He even felt able to defend the economic record of the government perhaps because the ineffectiveness of his anti-inflationary policies had not yet become fully apparent.\(^9^0\)

It is, nevertheless, true that Unified Party’s candidates did not always focus on particular points but rather on a broad appeal for unity. The party’s representatives in Hódmezővásárhely called for people from ‘every social class’ to join the party, emphasizing that the Unified Party was the only party capable of maintaining order and recreating historic Hungary.\(^9^1\) Specific policies were rarely mentioned in ministers’ speeches, which instead stressed that the party was for everyone and asked of electors not whether they supported agricultural or commercial, liberal or conservative interests but rather if they wanted ‘to live or to suffer’.\(^9^2\)

The official ideology of the party was, therefore, in line with Bethlen’s conception of how a governing party should function. It positioned itself as the representative of a broad range of conservative interests, combined with an appeal to rural voters, and an emphasis on acting in the interest of the nation. Such an appeal was indeed, not dissimilar to that which had been made repeatedly, and usually successfully, by the old Tisza governing party.

Unified Party Strengths

The party was making a powerful appeal by positioning itself as a unifying force, able to heal national and social divisions after the instability of the previous

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\(^{90}\) PTSA, Library, Politikai beszédek, 3 Füzet (A Unified Party pamphlet), Budapest, 1922.

\(^{91}\) OLK, 468, B/1, 181.

\(^{92}\) Ibid. See also, Bethlen István Gróf beszédei, i, pp.226-238.
years. Its candidates came from the old Smallholder party, the former KNEP, dissident and independent groups. This does not necessarily indicate that the party was appealing to authoritarian or reactionary values. Instead, it presented itself as being almost above politics, something that must have been attractive to the great many voters who had suffered in the years of factional turmoil which preceded these elections. Even the critique favoured by Marxist historians, which describes the Unified Party as ‘counter-revolutionary’, becomes paradoxically a further reason for explaining the party's popularity. As Mária Ormos points out ‘everyone was counter-revolutionary’ in their view of the Béla Kun dictatorship.

Indeed the very possibility that the Unified Party may have been genuinely popular with the electorate appears to have been overlooked by historians, yet there is much evidence to support this idea. Before the elections some journalists were expecting an overwhelming victory for the Unified Party which was expected to win 80% of the seats. Indeed Gömbös publicly claimed on 22 February that success was so certain it was not necessary to disrupt opposition meetings with stink bombs.

The party had at its core the old Smallholders who had been the largest party in the previous parliament and who appear to have retained the support of their traditional voters. A group of Smallholders who broke away and formed a new party obtained only two MPs. The Unified Party did not, however, rely purely on the Smallholders and successfully sought to obtain support from a range of other social groups - an aim reinforced by the decision to order every candidate to speak to every section of society.

In Szombathely, the trade minister Hegyeshalmy was reported to have the backing of railwaymen, postal workers, businessmen, and public officials, and the meeting to establish the Unified Party in Hódmezővásárhely attracted leading

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94 Ormos, Magyarország a két világháború között, p.117.
95 OLK,429, 12, Situation Report, 25 February 1922.
96 OLK,35, 1, c.
97 FML, I, 70, 24-25.
98 VML, IV, 401a.
businessmen, retired officials, and representatives of the professions as well as skilled workers and small landholders. The very fact that some individuals remained sufficiently critical of the government to be prosecuted by the authorities, yet still stood as party candidates, perhaps confirms that the party had an appeal that transcended normal political boundaries. Alternatively, it may suggest that the Unified Party was so popular that some individuals who were opposed to particular government policies still believed that they would benefit from being listed as Unified Party candidates.

The government also swiftly noted that the local prominence of candidates played an important role in determining the outcome of the election. It sought to exploit this by selecting candidates who were important figures in their constituencies, and instructing all candidates to draw up local manifestos. Some party candidates went even further and attacked elements of government policy to appeal to local concerns and interests. Furthermore, in a country where deference to traditional authority was a powerful influence, the party of the government, the local administration, and often the local elite stood a strong chance of obtaining popular support.

Certain party members were also popular enough to appeal across traditional party lines with Sokoropatkai Szabó, being endorsed by a liberal and radical Jewish newspaper in Győr. In one district, Papa, even elements of the MSZDP, ignoring their party's direct instructions, supported the Unified Party candidate. The importance and popularity of personalities was recognized by the party when it drew up detailed plans for successful candidates in the first round of voting to assist other

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99 OLK, 468, B/1, 181.
100 FML, I, 11, 4-8.
101 OLK, 808, 72, 16-21.
102 FML, I, 11, 4-8.
103 FML, I, 70, 24-25. Batkay notes that in some districts the initial Unified Party candidate was actually replaced due to local opposition to his selection. See Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, p.57.
104 OLK, 468, B/1, 824.
105 OLK, 26, 1275, 4788.
106 PTSA, 658.5, 593-596.
candidates who would be involved in later voting rounds. The party also had among its leadership Gömbös, who was popular among the extreme right wing, and Nagyatádi-Szabó who (being the most prominent advocate of land redistribution) as president of the party appeared to be a guarantor of the government's reforming intentions. Indeed he was viewed as being popular enough to help secure victory simply by appearing in a constituency.

Certainly the Unified Party had the ability to appeal to a broad swathe of the electorate. There were nevertheless, some organizational mistakes which may have cost the party seats and votes, and prevented its victory being even more comprehensive.

Unified Party Mistakes

The government was aware of the opposition that could be expected in industrial areas where the MSZDP had the most of its support, and in the Catholic and legitimist stronghold of north-west Hungary. Once electioneering began, however, concerns were expressed that organizational errors were affecting the party throughout the entire country. On 30 March, Kozma wrote to Gömbös with a fifteen-point criticism of his handling of the campaign so far, arguing that 'nothing has been done so far and what has been done has been full of mistakes', and attacking the way important individuals and newspapers had been needlessly antagonized. Of particular concern to Kozma were Gömbös's organizational failures. Further criticism of these failures appeared in a report presented a week later by the head of the MTI in Szombathely which stated that the formation of local party organizations had occurred too late and that the duties of the local leadership were still unclear. Even in

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107 FML, I, 70, 48.
108 Szinai and Szűcs, Titkos iratai, p.89.
110 OLK, 429, 4, 27-30; See also Mária Ormos's commentary on this letter in Ormos, Kozma Miklós, i, pp.118-119.
111 OLK, 429, 46, 2-20.
Hódmezővásárhely where Bethlen would stand for election, it was the MSZDP who were the first to establish a local party organization.\(^\text{112}\)

Such criticisms combined with the fact that the party had still not nominated its candidate in 54 districts, forced Gömbös to write to all főispáns on 11 April requesting their assistance in the work of local party organization and in obtaining sufficient signatures to nominate a candidate.\(^\text{113}\) Even after the party had secured victory, Kozma still felt that the party could have achieved more if it had not committed tactical errors in Budapest where twenty-five of the thirty mandates were won by the opposition.\(^\text{114}\)

The Unified Party could also have been damaged further by its failure to remove unofficial candidates who used the party’s name, but opposed the candidate nominated by the party leadership. Although this resulted in Unified Party support being split in the first round of voting in sixty-two districts, the party was still popular enough to win in fifty-six of them - thirty of these in the first round of voting. Thus, even in the districts where a second round was forced, the party was still generally successful. This was because as long as no opposition candidate received more than 50% of the vote the two most popular candidates went through to a new round. The result was that one of the Unified Party candidates was forced out (or in eleven districts, two Unified Party candidates contested the second round) and party support could focus on the other candidate allowing him still to win the seat.

Only in two seats did the existence of two Unified Party candidates prevent either one from participating in the second round, while in Ráckeve, where the party’s majority of the votes was split between two candidates, the opposition won the district in the second round of voting. The Unified Party also benefited from there being only twelve districts with two of its candidates standing against two or more opposition candidates. Elsewhere, even if the Unified Party’s vote was split, one candidate would be certain to go through to the next round of voting. A system with only one round of

\(^{112}\) OLK, 26, XXXVII unnumbered.

\(^{113}\) FML, I, 70, 24-25.

\(^{114}\) Nemes, Iratok, ii, p.298-300.
voting would have cost the party a further twelve seats, eight of these because its supporters divided their vote between two or more party candidates.\textsuperscript{115}

There is also the possibility that unofficial Unified Party candidates strengthened the party's position by drawing votes away from opposition candidates, thereby splitting the opposition vote. If this was the case, however, then supporters of such candidates would have been expected to transfer their vote to other opposition candidates in the second round of voting. Yet, as has been noted above, the Unified Party did rather well in constituencies where a second round of voting was held.

One reason why these mistakes did not inflict more damage on the Unified Party is that the opposition parties failed to take advantage of the opportunities presented. Indeed, the weaknesses of the opposition parties ensured that the Unified Party was the only party that could realistically win these elections.

The Opposition Parties' Weaknesses - The Legitimists

The legitimist KNEP had broken into three separate parties (the so-called Wolff, Andrássy and Haller groups) as well as being divided between various independent candidates all of whom sought to reinvent themselves once their unifying objective of restoring the monarchy had been undermined by the king's dethronement. In terms of broad political objectives, it is difficult to discern any substantial distinction between these groups and the Unified Party. Indeed the KNEP had played a role in supporting the Bethlen government until Charles IV's attempted coup d'état of October 1921.\textsuperscript{116} The Wolff party continued this co-operation during the election, forming a united list with the Unified Party in Budapest; it obtained cabinet posts after the election.\textsuperscript{117}

\textsuperscript{116} Szinai and Szűcs, Titkos iratok, pp.13-14.
\textsuperscript{117} Macartney, October 15\textsuperscript{th}, i, p.46.
The other parties were more critical of the government but they remained highly conservative and failed to distinguish themselves from the government's position on most practical issues. As Bethlen was happy to point out, a party which had supported much of the conservative legislation through 1920 and 1921 had limited opportunities to criticise the government which had emerged from that same legislation.\textsuperscript{118} The various offshoots of the KNEP thus continued to be defined by their legitimist convictions.\textsuperscript{119} Legitimism retained a powerful appeal to certain elements of society, and the government was warned before the election that it could divide the conservative vote in the same way it had divided the parliament,\textsuperscript{120} but the death of Charles IV in the middle of the elections took some of the sting out of the question.

The legitimists did benefit from the hostility of an element of the Catholic clergy to a government which they viewed as Calvinist. Three bishops were strongly anti-Bethlen and some clergy provided vocal and financial support for legitimist candidates.\textsuperscript{121} Yet the effect of this was minimized by the existence of prominent Catholics in the government and by the Prince Primate Csemoch's public comments that the government was Christian and not denominational.\textsuperscript{122}

Perhaps the legitimist parties' greatest weakness was their inability to form a workable coalition to benefit from the first-past-the-post system; thus, while obtaining 19.99% of the votes, they gained only 14.7% of the total seats.\textsuperscript{123} This was in very real terms an electoral disaster. It ensured that Bethlen's Unified Party would now be regarded as the pre-eminent conservative party and the future standard bearer of conservative and nationalist values.

The Liberals

\textsuperscript{118} OLK, 35, 1, dosszié c.
\textsuperscript{119} OLK, 149, 10, 37.
\textsuperscript{120} OLK, 468, B/1, 153.
\textsuperscript{121} OLK, 149, 10, 37.
\textsuperscript{122} Ivánné Devenyi, 'Csemoch János tevékenysége', Századok, 107, 1977/1, p.67.
\textsuperscript{123} See Hubai, Politikai pártok.
Being represented by separate parties also damaged the liberal cause. Its roots in the 19th century led to an advocacy of policies that offered little to agricultural voters and isolated it from church support.\textsuperscript{124} The Nemzeti Demokrata Párt, (NDP), (National Democratic Party), for example, which continued to adhere to its traditional principle of free trade, was almost utopian in its strident demands for universal and secret voting, and cynical in its insistence, at a time of economic crisis, on a rise in the minimum wage and increased wages for civil servants.\textsuperscript{125} Such appeals to differing, and in some ways antagonistic, social groups can at times provide a party with broad support - in this case they appealed to almost no one and were at best perceived as opportunistic. It also remained essentially a party representing urban values; not a single NDP candidate stood in the rural constituencies.

Even more unpopular was the Függetlései és 48-as Párt, (Independent and 48-ers Party), which based its values on the political ideas which had come to the fore in 1918 and suffered from its association with this unfavourable period.\textsuperscript{126}

The Független Kisgazda, Földmives és Polgári Párt, (Independent Smallholder, Landworker and Citizen’s Party), better known as the Rassay party, also had difficulty formulating a new response to the new circumstances. Its call for radical land reform was duplicated by the MSZDP and in a country torn between support for a Habsburg or a freely elected king, it perversely opted for the republican position.\textsuperscript{127}

The liberal parties’ greatest strengths were their leading figures who were especially prominent within the narrow political circles of Budapest, where the liberal parties achieved their greatest support. Vilmos Vázsonyi, leader of the NDP, was a highly regarded lawyer and politician who had played a role in drawing up the 1918 franchise proposals. Rassay was editor of the popular Budapest newspaper, \textit{Esti Kurir},

\textsuperscript{124} Nagy, \textit{The Liberal Opposition}, p.21.
\textsuperscript{125} Pándi, Osztályok és pártok, p.174.
\textsuperscript{126} Hubai, Politikai pártok, p.29.
\textsuperscript{127} Pándi, Osztályok és pártok, p.175.
and another leading liberal, Drozdy, edited the agrarian journal *Magyar Ugar*. The various liberal parties were really one-person groups divided by personal rivalry rather than fundamental policy differences. Their links with the ill-fated Károlyi government of 1918-1919 and their initial support for the Räterrepublik further tarnished them. They were also damaged by weak national party organizations that allowed the entire liberal opposition to put forward only eighty-eight candidates to contest the available 215 one-mandate seats.

In short, the liberal parties remained reliant upon a small, and increasingly impoverished, middle-income group of electors, with ten of the twelve liberal MPs coming from professional backgrounds, and nine being elected in Budapest and the larger cities. They too had failed to present a serious challenge to the values and position of the Unified Party.

The MSZDP

The Social Democratic Party, and its failure to win more than twenty-five seats, has particularly concerned communist historians. Certainly, in the largest cities the party was extremely successful, winning for example 40.5% of the vote in Budapest, 51.9% in Pécs, 60.4% in Debrecen and 62.7% in Miskolc. In the countryside, however, the party secured only five seats, and these were in particular concentrations of industry (i.e. Tatabánya, Salgótarjan, Dorog). Hungarian historians have seized upon these facts as demonstrating the way that the open ballot and bureaucratic manipulation distorted the election and prevented the Social Democrats achieving greater success.

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128 Ibid.
130 Hubai, *Politikai pártok*, p.28.
132 In actual fact the party would only have twenty-four M.P.'s as one candidate was successful in two seats and the party lost the second in a by-election.
It can, however, be argued that the discrepancies were caused by the genuine unpopularity of the MSZDP in the countryside. The party was weakened by two years of political isolation but even in 1920 it had received a ‘very unfavourable reception... in the villages’. Even though it had boycotted the 1920 elections, over 80% of the electorate had still voted. The MSZDP had done little to overcome this unpopularity, continuing to focus on industrial workers and promoting as its main objective for agriculture the unpopular idea of large-scale farming. There had been a show of MSZDP strength at the May Day celebrations of 1921 in Budapest, the large cities and industrial centres, but the countryside was silent.

The MSZDP was further affected by negative memories of the Räterepublik, which were still being recorded in the 1970s. Indeed a number of reports by local officials comment on the Unified Party’s popularity and the general conservatism of rural voters. In view of these points, it comes as no surprise that agricultural areas provided less than a third of the party’s funding, that the MSZDP was forced to rely on the industrial trade unions to provide a framework on which to organize the party, and that in the election the MSZDP received just 6.8% of the vote in rural areas.

The MSZDP's weaknesses in rural areas were exacerbated by its failure to field a candidate in 172 of the 195 open ballot seats. This was due to its inability to obtain the 10% (to a maximum of one thousand) of voters’ signatures needed to nominate all candidates who had not previously been MPs. This may partly be explained by considering the influence of the administration on the nominating

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134 Macartney, October 15th, i, p.25.
135 Nemes, Iratok, ii, p.256.
137 Dokumentumok a magyar forradalmi munkásmozgalom történetéből 1919-1929, p.133.
139 PML, 401a, 17, 45.
140 Sipos, A szocialdemokrata szakszervezetek története, pp.135-136.
141 Ibid.
143 Hubai, Politikai pártok, p.28.
process, but it is worth noting that in the twenty urban one-mandate seats, the MSZDP was able to put forward nine candidates. The requirements for a candidate being able to stand for election were, however, identical in both urban secret ballot and rural open ballot seats. This suggests that the lower percentage of MSZDP candidates in the countryside was primarily the result of the party's unpopularity among agricultural voters.

The MSZDP was also weakened by its administrative failings. As a result of its agreement with the government in December 1921, the party, and its union backers, had their property and funds restored. This provided, however, only limited time to build up funds and re-establish local organizations to fight a strong election campaign. The question of funding was partly resolved by requiring all union members to donate half a day's wages to the campaign but the party still experienced financial difficulties, eventually reporting that it could not provide posters for local organizations.

The party also had difficulty rebuilding its local organizations and by the end of May had succeeded in forming only twenty-eight new provincial structures. Consequently, campaigning was hindered by the lack of a well-developed party network and the likelihood of MSZDP candidates standing for election was substantially reduced. Even if we consider that in some districts the MSZDP may have been affected by bureaucratic abuses, it is still extraordinary that they were only able to field 32 candidates in the 215 seats which would elect one MP. It was a failure that may have been exacerbated by lack of time and resources, it may even have had something to do with the unpopularity of the party, but it was pre-eminently a failure of organization and would be sharply criticized at the MSZDP party conference of 1924.

144 A leading socialist of the period claims that this occurred in five seats; Árpád Szakasits, Szociál demokraták a parlamentben, Budapest,1922 (hereafter Szakasits, Szociál demokraták), p.81.
145 Fehér, A Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt, p.76.
146 PTSA, 658.5, 212.
147 Fehér, A 1922-es nemzetyűlési választások, p.63.
148 Hubai, A szociáldemokrata párt, p.129.
149 PTSA, 658.1, 50.
The party also suffered from an overly rigid centralized party structure which damaged local initiative and the decision-making process.\textsuperscript{150} In Aszar, for example, the local branch’s request about which other party they should work with, was not answered until 13 days later.\textsuperscript{151} At times, this had almost comic consequences. Against a background of party activists being reminded not to make any deals without central authorization,\textsuperscript{152} the central committee's failure to send a letter to the correct address in Makó ordering support for the liberal candidate ensured that the local party simply abstained from the vote,\textsuperscript{153} and the Unified Party won the seat with a 227 vote majority.\textsuperscript{154} The central committee also ignored local advice. In Mezötür, only on 2 May did the party accept the local branch's recommendation of support for a popular independent candidate.\textsuperscript{155} In Komárom, the local party complained throughout April that a candidate had still not been appointed\textsuperscript{156} while in Kiskünfélegyháza a section of the local organization refused to support the party's choice of candidate.\textsuperscript{157}

Nevertheless, the MSZDP had still made a real electoral breakthrough. For the first time in its history it had secured formal parliamentary representation. Furthermore it had become the largest opposition party and thus the foremost challenger to the Unified Party. In the post-election parliament the primary debate would now be not between different conservative parties, but between the ideology of the Unified Party and that of the MSZDP.

All the opposition parties, however, were affected by their inability to form a broad-based coalition, capable of presenting a real challenge to the Unified Party. The Jogvédő Liga demonstrated that there were common factors among the opposition such as criticism of the franchise and concerns about the administration, which could have been the basis for unity. Such elements of cohesion were not enough, however,
to produce a working coalition. Initially, the MSZDP felt confident enough to reject co-operation with the other parties, arguing, for example, that independently they could win five of the eight seats in Borsod county. In the end they were able to field only three candidates in that county and failed to win a single seat.\textsuperscript{158} By 23 April, the MSZDP realized that some form of alliance was essential and they formed a tactical voting alliance with the Rassay and Vázsonyi parties but some local MSZDP organizations disregarded instructions and still refused to co-operate with liberal candidates.\textsuperscript{159}

One would have expected such co-operation to occur voluntarily. It is, nevertheless, symptomatic of the deep distrust between the parties that it was necessary to attempt to ensure this through a formal agreement. Furthermore, the delay in coming to agreement wasted both time and resources. For example, those who had initially supported their party candidate’s unsuccessful attempt to be nominated could no longer nominate the new joint liberal-socialist candidate. This may partly explain why a liberal or socialist candidate stood in only 65 of the 215 one-mandate seats.\textsuperscript{160} The voting alliance also did not prevent the MSZDP continuing to co-operate with the Unified Party against the conservative opposition in Dombóvár and Szombathely.\textsuperscript{161} None of the opposition parties were prepared for real cross-party co-operation ‘without demanding unacceptable political compromises’.\textsuperscript{162}

The result of such reluctance was that the Unified Party with only 45.4% of the votes gained a clear majority of the seats and the ability to control the parliament to the detriment of all the opposition parties.

Results

\textsuperscript{158} PTSA, 658.5, 349.
\textsuperscript{159} Szakasits, Szociál demokraták, p.85.
\textsuperscript{160} Hubai, Politikai pártok, pp.20-30.
\textsuperscript{161} Karsai, A budai Sándor-palotában történt, p.96; Nemes, Iratok, ii, pp.292-293. Szakasits claims there was cooperation with the Unified Party in 9 seats but provides no evidence. See Szakasits, Szociál demokraták, p.91.
\textsuperscript{162} Nagy, The Liberal Opposition, p.47.
In terms of mandates obtained after the first round of voting and subsequent by-elections, the Unified Party gained 143 seats, the liberal, peasant and socialist parties obtained thirty-eight seats, the various conservative parties (including government-supporting parties) were reduced to thirty-three seats, and thirty-one MPs obtained mandates on independent manifestos.

Perhaps the most striking feature of these results, apart from the success of the Unified Party, is the domination of the new parliament by conservative-orientated parties. If we include the ten further independent MPs that were classified as government-supporting, then 186 of the 245 seats were occupied by conservative MPs. In terms of occupation, each social group and religion was represented in the parliament with, for example, forty-one large landholders, thirty-three small landholders and even (in the anti-Semitic environment of the Numerus Clausus) ten Jews. There were, however, marked discrepancies in occupational backgrounds between the parties. There were no industrial workers and only one converted Jew elected to any of the conservative parties, while the Unified Party MPs comprised all but one of the small and medium landholders. It was also an overwhelmingly male parliament. Only one woman was elected and she was a socialist.

Communist historians have focused on the way the more radical elements of the Smallholders party were reduced in the new parliament. Batkay accepted the substance of their argument claiming that Bethlen used the elections to purge the Smallholders from the assembly.

Criticism that the old Smallholders had been removed from the new parliament was clearly of concern to the government. It was addressed as early as June 1922 with the claim that there were still thirty-eight Smallholders in the party, which conflicts with the information in the parliamentary almanacs. Certainly, if there

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163 Sturm, Almanach, p.72. The almanach actually lists thirteen independent conservatives but three were elected on Unified Party programmes.
164 Sturm, Almanach, pp.72-73.
165 See for example, Magyarország története, i, pp.445-446.
166 Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, p.57.
167 Nemes, Iratok, ii, pp.298-299.
was a deliberate purge of the old Smallholders Party MPs, it would be consistent with Bethlen's objective of creating a stable and conservative Party. He certainly benefited from the defection from the party of some Smallholders, particularly poorer peasants MPs, in early 1922. Not only did these defections increase the conservative nature and internal cohesion of the party, but also the break-away party obtained only 29,464 votes and were reduced to two MPs. The fact that these defections were, however, voluntary means that it would be inaccurate to entirely explain the Smallholders' reduction in the Unified Party to deliberate government action.

Furthermore, of the fifty Unified Party members who had sat in the previous parliament, thirty-nine were former Smallholders and half of these were poor farmers without educational qualifications. In fact, the old parliamentarians had no better chance of survival in the other parties where they formed only forty of the 102 opposition MPs. It was actually the old KNEP MPs who were substantially reduced, with only twenty of them maintaining their seats in the new parliament. It seems, therefore, that any reduction of the more liberal elements in the Unified Party was a consequence of the electoral process rather than the result of a deliberate purge.

Conclusion

There are a number of conclusions that can be drawn from this study. It is clear that these were certainly not ‘free and fair’ elections. The evidence presented by communist historians, to support their contention that Bethlen used the government’s extensive powers to influence the electoral process, is only reinforced by new research. In particular the constitutional process was exploited to impose a new franchise and the upper levels of the administration were used as an extension of the Unified Party’s apparatus. The methods may have been somewhat subtler than has

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168 Hubai, Politikai pártok, p.38.
169 Sturm, Almanach, p.76.
previously been suggested, but Bethlen did abuse his power, and this fact cannot be left out of any comprehensive analysis of these elections.

Historians have however tended to over-exaggerate the scale of such corruption. The argument, for example, that the existence of the open ballot automatically provided the government with a means of rigging the elections is unsubstantiated. The fact remains that Bethlen secured only 45% of the vote for his party, a substantial but not necessarily overwhelming measure of popular support. It was not massive levels of corruption, but Bethlen's skill in exploiting a predominantly first-past-the-post electoral system that turned an already powerful party into a force able to dominate Hungarian inter war politics.

Consideration must not, however, be restricted to the question of electoral corruption. The new party that Bethlen formed was victorious because it did not rely solely upon subverting the electoral process, but used its advantages of organizational strength, tactical skill, and genuine popularity. The opposition parties by contrast remained divided, disorganized, and had only limited appeal to the electorate. They were unable to present an effective challenge to the Unified Party. Bethlen was therefore correct to view his electoral success as resulting from popular support. The elections clearly demonstrated that only the Unified Party could claim the right to form the next government. Bethlen exploited his power to win these elections, but he had also secured a legitimate mandate to govern.

The electoral process also continued the process of political consolidation. The new franchise did increase the likelihood of a Unified Party victory and increased political stability. The electoral process also brought the Unified Party closer to the Tisza model of a governing party, by strengthening its links with the administration, leading to the removal from the party of some its more radical (liberal) elements, and by granting the party and its leader the aura of victory. This process also marked the real defeat, and to some extent marginalization, of the conservative and liberal opposition parties. It was the MSZDP that would now become the leading opponent of the Bethlen government. Whereas in the 1920-1922 parliament debate had centred
on the various conservative views of how Hungary should develop, the debate after the 1922 elections would now effectively be between a conservative approach, advocated by Bethlen's Unified Party, and radical alternatives.
Chapter 4 - The Unified Party Crisis of 1922-1923

Introduction

On 2 August 1923, Gőmböös and five supporters withdrew their support from the government and joined the opposition. It is the contention of this chapter that this episode was the result of a protracted government crisis caused by one faction within the Unified Party challenging Bethlen’s conception of how the party should function.

Historians have persistently neglected an examination of the 1922-1923 Unified Party crisis. This is because their model of the Unified Party as being subservient to the prime minister could not incorporate the possibility of a real party crisis. Macartney argues that, although formally the party possessed a ‘democratic enough constitution’, the party leader, Bethlen, ‘was the complete master of the party’ because he could nominate the party’s candidates for parliament. Thus ‘all he needed to do to ensure the complete mastery of his own will was to see to it that his nominees were either men like-minded with himself, or men utterly subservient, or both’.1 Among openly Marxist historians the same view was expressed with the official history of Hungary, published in 1976, describing Bethlen’s domination of the party as akin to that enjoyed by Tisza, calling him the ‘boss’ (gazda) and the Unified Party MPs ‘mamelukes’.2

Recently, Romsics has offered a somewhat more subtle perspective. He still writes that Bethlen wielded ‘enormous power’ but he concedes that the party ‘limited to some extent the mobility of the government and of the prime minister [and] continued to provide some room for clashes of interests of various social strata and political tendencies’. He confusingly calls the party a ‘Vorparlament’ but is probably implying that it operated as a debating chamber, capable of

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1 Macartney, October 15th, i, p.47.
2 Magyarország története, ii, p.454.
criticising and amending legislation, before it was forced through the parliament. This conclusion, however, still leaves us with the impression that the party’s independence was limited and, in some respects, invisible.³

Batkay does entitle one of his chapters, ‘the party crisis of 1923’ but still ends up affirming the general historical consensus. He writes that ‘Bethlen assured himself of control of the Unified Party by nominating for election men with ideas identical to his own or, preferably, men whose subservience was guaranteed by their lack of independent ideas or sources of income’.⁴

The general conclusion is that Bethlen dominated the Unified Party in the same way that the two Tiszas dominated the pre-war governing party. This chapter will, however, argue that this was not the case in the 1922-1923 period, and that only after a sustained, party crisis that threatened the survival of the party, was Bethlen able to assert a real degree of control over the party.

It will begin by considering why a real crisis within the Unified Party could occur. It will do this in three ways. First, it will demonstrate that the party should not be viewed as being dominated by the prime minister. Secondly, it will reveal the existence of three major factions within the party. Thirdly, it will show that one of these factions, the right-radicals, demanded policies that were incompatible with the programme Bethlen was intent on pursuing. It will then go on to examine how this challenge manifested itself after the 1922 elections. It will demonstrate that the right-radical challenge, combined with dissatisfaction among the agrarian faction, threatened Bethlen with a united opposition, capable by early May of bringing down his premiership. It will then consider how Bethlen responded to this challenge, using all his tactical skills to preserve his authority and to isolate his opponents in the party. This will be followed by an examination of the methods used by Bethlen to undermine his opponents’ position after they had left the party and how he dissuaded other MPs from following suit.

³ Romsics, István Bethlen, p.182.
⁴ Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, p.35.
Reconsidering Bethlen’s Control of the Party

In order to recognize that a genuine crisis may have occurred in 1922-1923 we need to begin by demonstrating why earlier historians views of the Unified Party are inaccurate. In essence they have argued that Bethlen controlled the party through candidate selection, which provided Bethlen with the ‘enormous power’ ascribed to him. There are two problems with this approach. First, if Bethlen did control the party through candidate selection then we would expect to have seen a purge of existing MPs in the 1922 elections. As the previous chapter argues, however, there is little evidence to suggest a wide-scale purge of the party’s candidates before the 1922 elections. Defection is probably a more important reason than any government action, for explaining the reduction in the number of Smallholder MPs than any government action. Furthermore, even if the Smallholders were purged, the main challenge to Bethlen after the elections came not from them but from the right-radicals. It is not feasible to argue that the right-radicals were purged when their leader, Gömbös, was in charge of the election campaign.

Secondly, there is also no evidence to suggest that Bethlen was alone in appointing candidates, as some historians have attempted to argue. On the contrary, candidate selection appears to have occurred in a variety of ways. Thirty-four constituencies independently nominated candidates, of which ten went on to become official party candidates. Forty-five delegations from constituencies presented their requests for candidates directly to party headquarters in Budapest, and occasionally to cabinet ministers, and nineteen of these were accepted. Thus, already, we find at least twenty-nine candidates being nominated on the basis of strong local support.

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5 Nemés, Iratok, ii, p.68. One writer even claims that it was Gömbös who selected the candidates because this did not interest Bethlen. See Szokoly, "... és Gömbös Gyula a kapitány", p.214.
6 Szózat, 23 February to 8 April 1922.
The other means of candidate selection was by a six-member committee formed on 3 March 1922 to assess all nominations. It was this committee which drew up the final list of candidates.\(^7\) It was headed by Bethlen but also included Klebelsberg, Gömbös and the leader of the supposedly ‘purged’ Smallholders, Nagyatádi-Szabó.\(^8\) This was not simply a ‘rubber-stamp’ committee for decisions made elsewhere. Although the committee initially hoped to be able to publish the complete list of approved candidates on 9 March, not only Bethlen but also other members of the committee were still reported by the newspapers to be nominating candidates for selection at the end of the month. The full list was only made public on 8 April. The length of time the committee spent deliberating strongly suggests that Bethlen was not alone in controlling the process. Indeed, on 8 March, a specific agreement was reached that only candidates approved by both Bethlen and Nagyatádi-Szabó would be accepted as official candidates. The importance of other figures beside Bethlen in the process is also suggested by one of the official explanations for the delay in publishing the final list of candidates, which was that Nagyatádi-Szabó’s mother was ill and he had to leave Budapest to go and visit her. The implication was that without Nagyatádi-Szabó the committee would not be able to function.

It is also worth noting that Unified Party candidates appear to have come either from pre-existing parties, none of which Bethlen had earlier been willing to join, or were nominated on the basis of others’ recommendations.\(^9\) Indeed these recommendations, seized upon by earlier historians to prove that candidate selection boiled down to Bethlen’s personal assessment, actually suggest the opposite. Bethlen was not well enough acquainted with potential

\(^7\) Szózat, 4 March 1922.
\(^8\) Oddly the very source which outlines the role of Nagyatádi-Szabó, Klebelsberg and Gömbös in the selection procedure is used by Batkay to argue that Bethlen controlled the appointments procedure. See Szózat, 31 March 1922, and Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, pp.56-57, 137-138.\(^\) Nemes, Iratok, ii, p.274-275
candidates to measure the extent to which they would support his political programme and therefore had to rely on others' recommendations. It is worth noting in this respect that according to Jenő Gergely, about fifty party candidates had links with right-radical organizations, and considered themselves close to the right-radical group. Not only, therefore, did Bethlen not control candidate selection, it also appears that a large number of candidates were linked to the right-radical faction which would threaten his position in the 1922-1923 party crisis.

We can, therefore, conclude that Bethlen did not use candidate selection to control the party. He himself did not individually pick the candidates, did not purge the candidates, and ended up with a number of candidates who were opposed to elements of his political programme. Yet, if Bethlen did not control candidate selection, then the whole argument that he controlled the party becomes questionable.

The idea that the party operated as a single block of Bethlen's supporters is also contradicted by the general recognition that there were actually a number of factions within the party. These lack hard definition; the strength and influence of their respective supporters and the nuances of their ideologies remain uncertain. Nevertheless historians accept that such factions existed while failing to recognize that they provide another reason why a party crisis could occur. We can distinguish three basic positions within the party: the centre, the agrarian wing and the right-radicals.

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10 Gergely, Gömbös, p.124.
Factions Within The Party - the Centre

The centre of the party was made up of Bethlen’s closest supporters. These included the former so-called ‘dissident’ group of Bethlen’s followers, led by Klebelsberg, as well as the various parties which had merged with the Unified Party in February 1922. These parties had avoided siding with either the Smallholders or the KNEP in the disputes of 1921, instead joining with Bethlen in calling for centrist policies and party unification.\(^\text{12}\)

Also prominent within this group were the representatives of the industrial and commercial sectors.\(^\text{13}\) Batkay argues convincingly that, although they had few direct representatives in parliament, their influence was exerted through the interconnection of commercial, agricultural and political interests by means of company directorships, pressure groups such as the Gyáriparosak Országos Szövetség, (GYOSZ), (National Association of Manufacturers), and OMGE, and their funding of the party.\(^\text{14}\) According to the parliamentary almanacs, thirty-seven party MPs had direct business experience and/or company directorships, a number which increases if we include board members of agricultural companies and members of local business circles.\(^\text{15}\) Furthermore, the narrow circle in which both prominent political and economic figures moved - elite schools, universities and clubs such as the Nemzeti Kaszinó, (National Casino), helped ensure a level of interaction which is testified to by the large volume of correspondence in the archives between the government and leading business figures.\(^\text{16}\)

\(^\text{12}\) Pándi, Osztályok és pártok, p.158.
\(^\text{13}\) Romsics, István Bethlen, pp.180-181.
\(^\text{14}\) Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, pp.66-67. See also Pándi’s comments on the inter-relationship between business and leading politicians and the importance of Jewish business interests in Heinrich’s party in Pándi, Osztályok és pártok, pp.35, 158.
\(^\text{15}\) Sturm, Almanach; Nemzetgyűlési Almanach).
\(^\text{16}\) Just in the one volume collection of documents published by Miklós Szinai and László Szűcs we find a number of examples of such correspondence. See Szinai and Szűcs, Titkos iratai, pp.98-99, 128, 145, 159 and their notes on this on pp.55-56.
Former members of the pre-war conservative parties have also been included in this group, in particular members of István Tisza’s Nemzeti Munka Párt, (NMP), (National Party of Work), and the parliamentary almanacs list twenty-six party MPs who were former NMP politicians and twenty-five members of other pre-war conservative parties. In total, if we combine the two groups, we have sixty-eight MPs who had either company directorships or were members of the old conservative parties or both. The influence of this faction is also demonstrated by its predominance in the cabinet. This was confirmed by Bethlen’s reshuffle following the 1922 elections when the right-radical Tomcsányi was replaced as justice minister by Géza Daruváry, another of Tisza’s old party members, and Lajos Hegyeshalmý (who had not run on a Unified Party platform) was replaced by the more compliant Lajos Walkó at the trade ministry. Indeed with the exception of the minister for agriculture, Nagyatádi-Szabó, the entire cabinet came from the centre faction of the party.

The Agrarian Faction

The Agrarian faction comprised two sub-groups. On the left, was the remainder of Nagyatádi-Szabó’s old Országos Kisgazda Párt, (National Smallholder Party), regarded as representatives of the poorer agrarian workers although they firmly refused to describe themselves as peasants. They focused on expanding land reform, but had throughout 1921 also opposed an upper house and called for reform of local government and more pro-agrarian policies. While they had been reduced by defections (and possibly by an attempt to squeeze out

\[\text{\footnotesize \cite{sturm_2004}, p.99.}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize \cite{kanyar_2004}, p.33.}\]
some radical elements through the selection process), their number probably lies somewhere between the twenty to twenty-five MPs whom Romsics identifies and the thirty-eight listed by the government in a report compiled immediately after the elections, although one leading historian of the Smallholders accepts the agrarian press’s claim that seventy MP’s accepted Nagyatádi-Szabó as their leader. While there were several prominent figures among them, including Meyer, a former agriculture minister, they remained under the control of Nagyatádi-Szabó who seems to have inspired a remarkable loyalty among his supporters. He himself had sufficient credibility, derived from personal popularity, to be recognized as a leader in his own right. He kept tight control of his supporters and was regarded as somewhat unpredictable with Kozma writing that ‘what Nagyatádi-Szabó will do no one will know until the last minute’. This statement further undermines the perception of a compliant, Unified Party.

On the right of the agrarian faction were the remnants of the former Egyesült Kisgazda és Főldmives Párt, (Unified Smallholder and Landworker Party), formerly led by Gyula Rubinek until his death in January 1922, which had merged with Nagyatádi-Szabó’s party to form the 1920-1921 Smallholder Party around which Bethlen built his new party. They are described by József Sipos as generally conservative, somewhat anti-Semitic and, although in favour of land reform, not overly concerned with the rest of the reform programme advocated by Nagyatádi-Szabó’s supporters. It is again difficult to estimate their precise strength, but Romsics is probably right to claim that some newly-elected landowners and civil servants bolstered their numbers. Their leading personalities were the former state secretary Schandl, editor of the Smallholder newspaper Új Barázda and deputy head of the FOSZ, and Imre Örffy who had played a key role behind the scenes in unifying the two Smallholder parties.

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21 Nemes, Iratok, ii, pp.298-299.
23 On the process of party unification see Chapter 1.
24 See chapter 1 and Sipos, A Kisgazdapárt fejlődése, strukturája és eszmerendszere, pp.422-423.
In spite of their differences these two groups had enough in common to enable them to be regarded as one faction. They had both worked together in the Smallholder Party throughout 1921, they both represented agrarian interests, and they both demanded land reform and pro-agrarian policies. We shall also see that, during the 1922-1923 crisis, they effectively functioned as one group.

The Right-Radicals

Finally, one finds the right-radicals. This faction’s size and relationship to the party is perhaps the most difficult to define. Romsics writes that it consisted of a dozen MPs, but Kozma put the figure in April 1923 at around twenty to thirty, though only six of their number would eventually leave the party. Prior to that point, it appeared to have had broader and possibly fluctuating support. Like the Smallholders led by Nagyatádi-Szabó, this faction also had a prominent and charismatic leader able to inspire loyalty in his supporters: Gyula Gömbös.

Historians see right-radicalism as being rooted in the counter-revolutionary ideology that emerged from Szeged in 1919, held by army officers who gathered around Horthy in that period. Incorporated into right-radicalism are therefore such figures as Kozma, Tibor Eckhardt, head of the prime minister’s press office until the 1922 election, a number of those in Horthy’s cabinet and even Horthy himself. Nevertheless, divisions among the right-radicals were already emerging in 1921 with the ideological, and ultimately military, clash between legitimists such as Prónay, Ostenburg and Lehár and the free-electors headed by Gömbös and Kozma.

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26 The term used to describe this group in Hungarian is fajvédők (race-protectors) but can be rendered more appropriately in English as ‘right-radicals’.
27 See Nemes, Iratok, ii, pp.313-316.
28 On the links between Gömbös and the regime see Szinai and Szűcs, Titkos iratai, p.53.
Nevertheless one can argue that there was a certain camaraderie derived from the shared experiences of the 'szegediék'. This ideology also exerted an influence through its supporters in the press such as the Nép and Szózat newspapers, and through the nationalist, irredentist organizations, which shared its patriotic and nationalistic zeal. One example of such an organization is the Magyar Országos Véderő Egyesület, (MOVE), (Hungarian National Defence Force Union), which was led by Gömbös, had Horthy as its honorary leader, and such figures as Kozma, Perényi, and state secretary Gyula Pekar among its members. Bethlen himself was certainly a member of some nationalist organizations although precisely how many remains unclear. The government took a close interest in the workings of a number of these organizations and even supported some of their activities financially.

We should not, however, overestimate the influence of these right-radical organizations. While there have been suggestions that parliament and government were riddled with and even controlled by them, Batkay comprehensively dissects such claims. It is worth noting for example that Miklós Bánffy, a member of the EKSZ secret society of which Gömbös was also a leader, far from supporting the right-radicals was actually criticized for his perceived 'liberalism' and forced to resign from office. Nevertheless, a sign that these organizations had a certain importance is shown by the government's decision to put Gömbös, their acknowledged leader, in charge of the 1922 election campaign and the later drive to expand the party organization in the probable hope that he could ensure they supported the government. Indeed, the plan for expanding the party's organization explicitly relied on the participation of the very organizations - the MOVE, the

29 See for example Horthy’s comments to Kozma after Gömbös had left the Unified Party in Ormos, Kozma Miklós, pp.121-124.
30 OLK, 429, 13, 50; Dósa, A MOVE, p.105.
31 Szinai and Szűcs claim Bethlen was a member of the Honszertet Társaság. See Szinai and Szűcs, Titkos iratai, p.31. István Mócsy claims Bethlen also joined the EKSZ. See Mócsy, The effects of World War 1 The Uprooted, p.160.
32 Szinai and Szűcs, Titkos iratai, p.32; OLK. 26, 1266, 176.
33 Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, pp.50-51.
34 Pater Zadravecz titkos naplója, p.97.
Ébredő Magyar Egyesület, (ÉME), (Union of Awakening Hungarians), sports clubs, patriotic societies, some newspapers - which had the closest links with the right-radicals. Such co-operation would not however last beyond 1923.

Having determined that there were different factions within the party, we can now consider in greater detail the differences between one of these factions, right-radicalism, and the government. In this way a deep ideological gap will be revealed which manifested itself in the 1922-1923 party crisis.

I ideological Divisions between Bethlen and the Right-Radicals.

Even though historians have recognized the existence of factions within the party, they have been unwilling to accept that any real divisions existed which could provoke a crisis. Other reasons have, therefore, been found for the party infighting which began after the 1922 elections.

Nemes in 1956 claimed that Gömbös’s split from Bethlen was triggered 'in large part by the influence of foreign-policy events'. Gergely, in his biography of Gömbös, draws the same conclusion. He claims that the divisions in the party were caused by Gömbös’s advocacy of a policy based upon closer relations with Italy and Germany while Bethlen favoured closer ties with the western democracies in general and Great Britain in particular. As Hungary in 1922 was still unable, however, to develop good relations with any of the great powers, it seems unrealistic that such hypothetical disagreements could have forced Gömbös to precipitate a party crisis and break away to form a new party. The same can be said of claims that it was arguments over the need for a foreign loan that provoked the crisis. This question only came to prominence later, whereas divisions in the party had already emerged in 1922. Indeed Kozma, in

35 OLK, 26, 1266, 163.
36 Nemes, Iratok, ii, p.103.
37 Gergely, Gömbös, pp.130-131; Gergely, Gömbös, Vázlat, pp.80-81.
38 Romsics, Ellenforradalom és konszolidáció, p.187.
April 1923 at the peak of the crisis, specifically denied that such arguments lay behind the divisions. He even wrote that with respect to foreign policy, there was general agreement within the party. Romsics, in his most recent work does not even recognize an ideological divide within the party, claiming ‘the great difference [lay] not in the diagnosis of the problems or in the objectives, but in the remedies proposed’.

Batkay initially appears not to reproduce the weaknesses of the Nemes-Gergely-Romsics line of argument. He begins his evaluation by pointing to right-radical demands for an increasingly anti-liberal and anti-Jewish policy as the cause of the crisis. He then undermines this argument, however, by claiming that division in the party was really rooted in Bethlen’s ‘goal of political and economic consolidation, and of his foreign policy which required a crackdown on extremist groups’. Other historians have also come to the conclusion that Bethlen had manipulated the problems with the right-radicals for his own benefit. Szinai writing in 1971 argues that it was Bethlen who profited from the split because he was now able to ‘construct his own personal power apparatus’. He concluded that ‘it was not Gömbös who split from Bethlen but the prime minister who drove out the right-radicals from the government party’. A more recent work by Zsuzsa Nagy comes to the same conclusion arguing that Bethlen ‘compelled the right-radicals to leave’ although she argues that his motive was a desire to enhance the reputation of the Unified Party.

The possibility that right-radicalism represented a fundamental challenge to the government and itself provoked the party crisis of 1922-1923 has not yet been properly considered. To evaluate this hypothesis we need to consider whether right-radicalism amounted to more than merely a concern about Bethlen’s plans for economic stabilization, or aspirations for a change in foreign policy.

39 OLK, 429, 12, Situation Report 5 April, 1923.
40 Romsics, István Bethlen, p.192.
41 Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, p.72.
43 Nagy, Két Háború Között, p.54.
Oddly, considering how the ideological basis of right-radicalism has been generally overlooked, the official history of Hungary published in 1975 gives a comparatively detailed analysis of its objectives. It states that right-radicalism 'wanted to produce economic stability on an agrarian basis through a race-defending programme, pushing to the back the capitalist, while wanting a changing of the guard in favour of the gentry, Christian bourgeoisie, and officials. It opposed the government's search for relationships in the west and its willingness to continue discussions with the Little Entente, insisting instead that the government rely on Mussolini, Italian fascism, and German revisionist groups of the extreme right'.

Only in passing does this definition touch upon the salient feature of right-radicalism, which almost every speech and writing of Gömbös and his supporters obsessively dealt with: the 'Jewish question'. Underpinning right-radicalism was a particular form of anti-Semitism which provided an ideological drive and vision sufficient to create a real break with government policy. It is, however, important to note that it was not anti-Semitism per se that caused the right-radicals to break away from Bethlen; a visceral dislike of Jews could also be found in government circles.

Bethlen had been prepared to act against what he perceived as the excesses of anti-Semitism, intervening to plead for an end to pogroms during Horthy's march on Budapest and using his influence to secure the release of Jews from his constituency who had been interned. He also continued to employ Jews in the prime minister's office, and authorized substantial payments to Jewish organizations to provide emergency aid to their community. It is also worth

44 Magyarország története, ii, p.512.
45 Even the name of the party Gömbös would establish in 1923, the Fajvédő Párt (Race-Defending Party), referred directly to its anti-Semitic programme.
46 Almost alone among Marxist historians, Zsuzsa Nagy recognizes the importance of anti-Semitism in the politics of right-radicalism describing it as one of their 'leading ideas' (vezérgondolat) see Nagy, Bethlen liberalis ellenzéke, pp.95-96.
47 OLK, 468, B/1, 73.
48 OLK, 26, 1270, 5798.
49 OLK, 468, B/8, 1335.
noting that his government retained close links with Jewish business and cultural leaders, providing them with a forum to challenge calls for further anti-Semitism.\(^50\)

Nevertheless, the government did continue to administer, albeit rather half-heartedly, the anti-Semitic **Numerus Clausus**.\(^51\) It also contained men like Kozma who could rejoice at his ability to kick Jews out of positions he controlled\(^52\) and the prime minister's press office regularly refused to licence newspapers on the basis that they were either Jewish-owned or concerned with Jewish themes.\(^53\)

There are also several examples of the government quietly taking action against Jewish interests. On 17 May 1922, Gömbös wrote to Bethlen about an American Jew who was seeking to buy a small Budapest theatre. Using the same unpleasant language as in Gömbös’s letter ('he wants to get his hands on it') Bethlen urged Vass to ensure that legislation was drawn up to stop all cultural institutions, including this one, being sold to foreigners.\(^54\) Concerns about Jewish influence therefore lay behind this measure even though it was not dressed up in racial language. Again, on 4 August 1922, Bethlen asked the interior minister to prevent the building of a Jewish-owned cinema in Budapest, which would threaten the position of five Christian-owned cinemas in its vicinity.\(^55\) These examples should not be taken to mean that the government was driven by a dislike of the Jews, but they do indicate that anti-Semitism was certainly prevalent in government circles as was a willingness to maintain existing forms of racial discrimination.

Right-radicalism, however, went far beyond such relatively mild anti-Semitism. It's programme stemmed from a view that the Jews had come to

\(^{50}\) On these links see Tibor Erényi, 'Zsidok és a magyar politikai elet (1848-1938)', *Múltunk*, 1994/4, pp.18-21.

\(^{51}\) A detailed account of the introduction and application of the Numerus Clausus is given in Katalin Szegvári, *Numerus Clausus rendekezések az ellenforradalmi Magyarországon*, Budapest, 1988, pp.113-141.

\(^{52}\) OLK, 429, 2, 144.

\(^{53}\) See for example OLK, 26, 1273, 2496 / 2635.

\(^{54}\) OLK, 468, B/5, 20-22.

\(^{55}\) OLK, 468, B/3, 1152.
dominate certain areas of society (agriculture, business, the professions) to the
detriment of the nation and that only government action could reverse this
process. The right-radicals, therefore, demanded an anti-Semitic programme that
threatened not only the Jews but also the social structures that supported their
position. This required much more than just the introduction of the Numerus
Clausus which operated only within the state’s pre-existing domain, the state
universities. Instead, right-radicalism demanded that restrictions on Jews now be
applied in the private sector, which was a direct challenge to the government’s
basic belief in minimal state intervention.

If we consider that in 1910 Jews made up around two-thirds of those
leasing out estates and 20% of those owning farm properties larger than 200 hold,
and that there was a widely-held view that these numbers had been rising since the
war, then the radical nature of demands for the Numerus Clausus to be extended
into agriculture, limiting Jews to ownership and leasing rights of perhaps 6% of
the land, become clear.\textsuperscript{56} Already implicit in such demands was a challenge to the
whole issue of private property and the notion of a free-market in land transfers
and leasing. If extended to business, banks, and currency dealings, it would have
challenged the concept of private enterprise and a relatively unregulated economy.
Such an approach would have necessarily entailed a massive extension of the
state’s role resulting in a regulated economy, substantial income redistribution and
an element of real social transformation.

The rhetoric of the right underlined this social radicalism with its
condemnation of the aristocracy for being ‘of foreign descent and making a pact
with the Jews’. Its criticism of the MSZDP was furthermore targeted not at its

\textsuperscript{56} According to statistics for 1910 Jews comprised 73.2% of leaseholders and 19.9% of
landowners for properties larger than 1000 hold (1 hold = 1.42 acres) and for properties between
200 and 1000 hold 19.9% of land owners and 62% of leaseholders, see V.Karady and I.Kemény,
‘Les juifs dans la structure des classes en Hongrie’ in Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales,
22, June 1978, pp.41-42. For contemporary opinions, expressed even in government circles, that
the numbers of Jewish farmers were increasing see OLK, 429, Situation Report, 9 November
1922.
social policy but at its ‘internationalism’ and ‘unpatriotic’ nature. Such language smacked of a form of socialism entirely at odds with the conservatism of Bethlen and the policies he advocated.

Unsurprisingly, communist historians have been keen to downplay or even overlook this aspect of anti-Semitism for fear of tarnishing themselves with any links to such an unpleasant ideology. Even those historians who were prepared to recognize the ‘anti-Semitic, anti-capitalist’ nature of right radicalism failed to note that it went well beyond attacking only the business interests of Jews. It is, however, essential to note that right-radicalism can just as easily be regarded as social radicalism dressed in the clothes of anti-Semitism as vice-versa. Indeed, one need not be unduly concerned with which took primacy; in Gömbös’s conception the two can be seen as going rather neatly together.

This re-evaluation of right-radicalism enables us to recognize the fundamental difference between the anti-Semitism of Gömbös and Bethlen. The key to the whole crisis lay in Bethlen’s refusal to allow anti-Semitic policies to be used as an instrument of social change in the private sector. While, in the government’s sphere of influence, anti-Semitism would be tolerated and even, if required, quietly promoted, the government was not prepared to see this become the driving force behind the entire government policy.

The danger posed by right-radicalism was spelled out by Bethlen in a speech on 22 June 1922. He warned that ‘those who profess the Christian faith, [irányzat], must know that this faith must be expressed through actions and not loud slogans, the beating of heads and the overturning of the law but rather honest

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57 Pándi, Osztályok és pártok, p.62; Macartney, October 15th, i, p.34. See also Gömbös’s speech in parliament on 24 July 1922 reported in Budapesti Hírlap, 25 July, 1922.
58 See for example Dósa, A MOVE, pp.122-132 and specifically pp.127-128 where one newspaper article by Gömbös is taken to imply his support for large landowners and big business.
59 See for example Pándi, Osztályok és pártok, pp 37-39.
60 Eugen Weber makes exactly this point in his comments on Gömbös. See Eugen Weber, Varieties of Fascism, Florida, 1982, p.90. It is also worth noting that at times Gömbös was even prepared to deny that his programme was specifically directed against Jews. See Budapesti Hírlap, 17 December 1922. It is also noticeable how many of the right-radicals made a later transition into radical smallholder and socialist parties such as Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky and Ferenc Eckhardt.
61 For Bethlen’s view on a racial policy in agriculture, see Romsics, István Bethlen, p.192.
and clean work to go in another direction is to split from our way'. This was not an issue on which he was prepared to compromise, stating clearly on another occasion 'The Jewish question is not, and cannot become, the cornerstone of our policy'.

Yet although the divisions between the two leaders on domestic policy appear in retrospect unbridgeable, Bethlen, at least initially, had no interest in forcing the party to choose between himself and the right-radicals. Although he could not allow the right radicals to determine government policy, there was no reason why they could not be a part of a broad governing party. This feeling can only have been strengthened by the support the government received from the right-radicals on a whole range of issues - their opposition to socialism and legitimism, their activities in the Burgenland, their support for party unification, and their role in the 1922 elections. It was also entirely in keeping with Bethlen's conception of the Unified Party, and the model governing party established by the two Tiszas, that a range of factions and interests could be, and indeed should be, included. The right-radicals were, however, increasingly determined to function not only as a part of the party but also as the driving force behind the party. This attempt by one faction to take control of the party was a direct threat to the broad-based nature of the party and the position of Bethlen.

We can conclude, therefore, that Bethlen did not control the party; the party was instead divided into different factions, and one of these factions was at odds with Bethlen's political programme. All the ingredients for a real party crisis were in place. It is not, therefore, surprising that the first signs of trouble emerged as soon as the 1922 elections were over.

First Signs of Trouble

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62 Budapesti Hirlap, 23 June, 1922.
Hostility to Gömbös among some leading figures was already evident. He was criticized for his organizational mistakes in the elections and for his general attitude, which could appear abrasive. General Kálmán Shvoy wrote that Gömbös ‘has made a great deal of enemies for himself’.\(^64\) He also suffered a setback from Bethlen’s refusal to appoint him interior minister. Bethlen preferred instead to nominate the more reliable figure of Rakovszky, drawn from the centre of the party, to fill this important post.\(^65\) Bethlen also revealed his own concerns about the extreme right, writing in a letter to all főispáns on 16 September that the ÉME ‘in some of their local organizations is influencing turbulent elements’, although he still argued that it should be used to expand the party.\(^66\) Such concerns must have been strengthened by the entire opposition’s sustained attack on the government for its links with the ÉME, which was widely blamed at this time for the bombing of a liberal club during the elections.

When Iván Héjjas, one of the most notorious counter-revolutionaries claimed, ‘I have not yet given my last command’, Bethlen seized the opportunity to demonstrate his ability to take on the extreme right. He condemned articles praising Héjjas in the right-radical newspapers as ‘utterly misguided’, ordered the justice minister to consider instigating legal proceedings, and warned Héjjas not to obstruct order. When reports arrived that Héjjas was planning a march on the Burgenland Bethlen made good on his warnings and had Héjjas briefly imprisoned.\(^67\)

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\(^64\) Shvoy Kálmán titkos naplója, Entry dated 18 June, 1922; OLK. 429, 4, 27-30. See also OLK, 429, 4, 2-20, 27-30.
\(^65\) Szokoly, Éés Gömbös Gyula a kapitány, p.219.
\(^66\) Nemes, Iraitók, ii, p.306.
\(^67\) Szózat, 8, 9, 16 July 1922; Budapesti Hirlap, 9, 16 July 1922; Romsics, István Bethlen, pp.190-191. The affair did not appear to do substantial damage to the government’s relation with the right-wing press. The editor of the Szózat, Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky, blamed the offending article on a guest leader writer although he still allowed him to continue praising Héjjas. See Pesti Napló, 9 July 1922 and Szózat, 23 July 1922.
This action, however, not only failed to placate the left, but also raised tensions on the right of the party. Gömbös, in particular, was determined to involve himself in the debates on the arrest. Perhaps he sought to prevent any leftward shift by the government, but his intervention had the effect of bringing the divisions between himself and Bethlen into the open. On 24 July, Gömbös announced that he would applaud the MSZDP if they stood on a national basis, declared that only the question of the restoration of the monarch, [királykérdés], separated him from the Christian opposition, demanded politics that ‘ensured the supremacy of the Hungarian race’, claimed that ‘the Numerus Clausus did not need to be repealed but rather improved in every area’, and demanded that the government reveal how much land was in ‘Jewish hands’ by no later then 1 September.68

Gömbös’s speech demonstrated just how extreme the right-radical concepts were. In sharp contrast to a conservative approach which regarded any form of socialism as ‘destructive’, Gömbös was now suggesting that some form of socialism, albeit in an almost undefined form, was actually in the national interest. He also implied that he intended to co-operate with the conservative opposition on all issues except the restoration of the monarch, although his wording was vague enough to suggest other interpretations. He had also now begun to demand publicly that anti-Jewish sentiment be translated into practical politics. Another worrying development for the government was that the speech also encouraged Gömbös’s supporters to be more outspoken. Dezső Buday, on 25 July, again called for the Numerus Clausus to be extended, and Tibor Eckhardt demanding that four newspapers, including the respected Pesti Napló, be closed down.69 Gömbös’s speech also provoked talk of a ‘shadow government’, [mellékkormány], with the conservative Budapesti Hírlap describing the right-radical’s demands as only

68 Nemzetgyűlési Napló, 23, 23 July 1922 and Budapesti Hírlap, 23, 25, July 1922
69 Szózat, 26, 27 July 1922.
paralleled in the ‘ugly oppression of the time of reactions’. Bethlen contented himself with reaffirming his opposition to those who would ‘differentiate between Hungarian citizens’ but probably hoped all the excitement would die down, aware that any further response would only fuel continuing press speculation about divisions within the government.

Agrarian Dissatisfaction

At this point we also need to consider the position of the agrarian faction. Up to now, only József Nagy has challenged the prevailing notion that the agrarians were a compliant part of the Unified Party. Batkay gives them only the briefest of mentions, dealing with their relationship with the government in two paragraphs. It is, however, worth looking at the agrarian faction’s position in more detail. It was bad enough for Bethlen that the right-radicals were beginning to challenge his policies, but there were also now indications that the agrarian faction was deeply unhappy with Bethlen’s apparent disregard for agrarian interests.

The agrarians’ criticism was initially directed at the government’s new tax system. The fundamental cause of the economic crisis was a classic case of low tax revenues. This was due to a collapse in economic production, and high government expenditure, resulting in hyperinflation. The government’s attempt to rein in public expenditure in 1921, with a planned budget deficit of a mere 20%, was undermined by an unwillingness to rapidly reduce the numbers and pensions of civil servants, by a veritable flood of special credits for various pet projects.

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70 Budapesti Hírlap, 26 July 1922 The phrase ‘mellékkormány’ to describe Gömbös’s position was already being used by the opposition in early July. See Nemzetgyűlési Napló, 16, 8 July 1922.
71 Szózat, 26 July 1922 On these press rumours, see for example Budapesti Hírlap, 19, 31 August 1922.
73 Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, pp.73-74.
and by public anger at the few actual cuts in expenditure which the government was able to achieve. The result was the resignation of the finance minister, the printing presses being turned back on, and another surge of hyperinflation.

As the government remained unwilling to reduce its expenditure significantly, it chose instead to tackle the problem of low tax revenues. In the summer of 1922, the minister of finance Miklós Kállay introduced new proposals, which replaced the previous 7.5% tax rate on all those earning over 2000 gold crowns with effectively a flat tax rate of 1%. While this spread the tax net far wider, thus potentially generating substantially higher revenues, the extension of taxation was deeply unpopular. This was particularly the case among those farmers who had never earned sufficient amounts to be included in the old tax band.74

Although the leaders of the agrarian faction did not openly criticise the existing tax proposals, a number of backbenchers expressed their concerns and two MPs, including the speaker of the house, resigned from the party.75 Smallholder irritation at the agricultural tax also tied in with their dislike of other elements of government policy. Dissatisfaction with the pace of the land reform was reported by the prime minister’s ‘social-political’ department as early as February 1922. The landless peasantry were described as impatient for land reform to bring results and sceptical of those administering the process.76 There was also continued opposition among farmers to the capital levy which was levied on large estates, with recommendations being made in the cabinet as early as 3 March that cases near 1000 hold should be reconsidered, with no payment to be made if the income of the whole property was less than 10 000 crowns.77

74 Romsics, István Bethlen, pp.187-188.
75 Although Kozma in his situation report dismissed Gaál’s resignation he still wrote that this demonstrated that the government needed to take into account Smallholder views on tax policy. See Nemes, Iratok, ii, pp.267-371.
76 OLK, 808, 72, 1-4, Situation Report, February 1922
77 The details of the capital levy and initial Smallholder opposition to this tax are discussed in more detail in chapter 1.
that the capital levy would be paid partly in land to be used in the land reform. This meant that if the levy was reduced, the amount of land to be redistributed would also fall. Indeed, this problem was so intractable that a cabinet meeting held earlier in the year to discuss the level of the levy could only agree that a solution was urgently needed.\textsuperscript{78}

Just to make matters worse, the government had chosen to resurrect the idea of re-establishing an upper house, something the agrarians had long objected to. The draft proposals were again put before the cabinet in June 1922 and were distributed for consultation in July.\textsuperscript{79} The appointment of Iván Rakovszky as the new interior minister only added to the anger of the agrarian faction, particularly when he declared in respect of local government reform that he was determined to maintain the 'noble and sanctified traditions', a view which had led to a furious Smallholder reaction when he had previously expressed it in August 1921.\textsuperscript{80}

Adding to the pressure were the large landowners who put forward a series of complaints about the regulations of land-leasing and the costs to farmers of the land reform.\textsuperscript{81} The whole agrarian question even seemed to be spilling on to the streets. A large meeting was held on 19 August in Budapest to press for reforms to taxation although it was not expressly targeted at the government, as Bethlen himself was invited to address the meeting.\textsuperscript{82} Seeking to head off dissent, Bethlen convened a special meeting on 2 September of all the party’s MPs who took an interest in land reform, in other words primarily the agrarians, which agreed on the need to expand the OFB by a further 54 persons. Bethlen also avoided a confrontation with the agrarians over the restoration of an upper house, and allowed the issue to drop quietly from the political agenda.\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{78} OLK, 27, Mt.jkv, 3 March 1922.
\textsuperscript{79} OLK, 27, Mt.jkv, 7 June 1922.
\textsuperscript{80} OLK, 26, 1267, 1183 and Budapesti Hirlap, 17 June 1922. See also Chapter 1 for the earlier dispute between Rakovszky and the Smallholders. On the question of administrative reform and Smallholder opposition, see Andor Cszmadia, A magyar közigazgatási fejlődése, Budapest, 1976, pp.353-362.
\textsuperscript{81} OLK, 468, B/3, 827; Szinai and Szűcs, Titkos iratai, pp.118-119.
\textsuperscript{82} OLK, 468, B/1, 1220.
\textsuperscript{83} OLK, 26, 1313 98; Budapesti Hirlap, 3 September 1922.
These concessions could not in themselves satisfy the agrarians, but they did temporarily alleviate their grievances. The danger, however, still remained that the right-radicals would mount a challenge to the government that dove-tailed with agrarian concerns to produce a broad front capable of derailing the government's policies.

Gömbös had not so far chosen to work directly with the agrarian faction to promote their agenda. However, he did serve as a conduit for dissenting opinions, passing on to Bethlen complaints he had received about the tax system. He also continued to press for a policy of 'racial defence' in agriculture. In a letter to Bethlen in August 1922 he repeated his request for information on the numbers of Jews involved in agriculture and the size of their property holdings. Bethlen did not dismiss the idea immediately, forwarding the request to the Central Statistical Office. He must, nevertheless, have been gratified to learn that the statistics were incomplete and no answer could be given. Gömbös's argument did, however, receive further backing from Kozma who on 9 November presented information from an unknown source claiming that, in 1914, Jews were strongly over-represented among the largest landowners and under-represented among the smallest. He also added an entirely unsubstantiated view that Jews had actually increased their representation since the war.

Promises to speed up land reform could for the moment reduce dissatisfaction among the agrarians and decrease the likelihood of them cooperating with the right-radicals. It could not, however, remove that danger altogether. For example, right-radical demands for the expropriation of Jewish land had the potential to appeal to the agrarians who were keen to see an increase in the amount of land available for redistribution.

Certainly, the political atmosphere remained tense enough for Bethlen's decision to go on holiday at this moment to be considered a particularly ill-judged...
decision. The error was compounded by his choice of Klebelsberg as his temporary replacement. Klebelsberg not only lacked the prime minister's personal authority - with predictable consequences for party discipline - but was also mistrusted by the right-radicals on account of his supposedly 'liberal' outlook.^^

The First Challenge

Problems surfaced almost immediately. Batkay suggests that Gömbös was already at work circulating a 'white paper', outlining grievances and advocating changes. On the day that Bethlen departed for holiday, 18 September 1922, Gömbös began openly circulating a petition which he presented as the basis for a new Keresztény Szövetség, (Christian Alliance). MPs from all the parties were asked to sign a statement declaring that 'the undersigned MPs without respect to party affiliations declare their most binding brotherly co-operation in the interests of realizing by legal means the idea of Christian racial-defence and the defence of the Christian Hungarians' position'.

This flowery language did little to conceal the double-challenge to the government. First, it put the racial question back at the top of the agenda. Secondly, it did this by seeking to override existing party differences, and thus disregarded existing notions of party discipline and party unity. Attempts by the right-radicals to play the whole thing down, with Eckhardt claiming it was intended merely to 'document abroad that in Christian Hungary the parliament is also Christian', did nothing to resolve tensions. At a party meeting on 27 September the agrarians launched a sustained attack on the petition, with Nagyatádi-Szabó describing it as unnecessary and improper. Gömbös's claim that Bethlen had approved the petition can only have fuelled Smallholder anger since they had not been consulted and must therefore have felt they had been kept in the

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87 Mária Ormos, Kozma Miklós, i, p.117; Szokoly, ... és Gömbös Gyula a kapitány, p.220.
88 Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, p.73; Budapesti Hírlap, 19 September, 1922.
89 Kardos, Legitimizmus, p.104.
dark. It is an indication of the tensions, and of Klebelsberg’s weakness, that the meeting failed to take a decision on the matter. The gathering of signatures - and arguments - continued until Bethlen returned from holiday on 2 October.\(^{90}\)

The seriousness of the crisis was now confirmed by the popularity of the petition. As well as Gömbös, other party leaders such as Wolff, Haller and Friedrich had also signed. The total number of signatories was somewhere around eighty to one hundred MPs, including fifty from the Unified Party. Indeed Kozma expected another seventy more to sign in the future.\(^{91}\) Bethlen’s response was to embark on a classic damage-limitation exercise. In a rare public statement, he admitted that Gömbös had initially informed him of the petition, but justified his authorization by saying that the whole thing was not about forming a new political formation ‘but a common defence against radicalism’, He added that he had warned Gömbös not to interfere with either party policy or party discipline. Bethlen also condemned suggestions that this was leading to a new wave of anti-Semitism. He stated, ‘I would never approve of the revival of such ambitions, but the Gömbös action never even planned for this’.\(^{92}\)

This succeeded in calming tensions. By publicly defining Gömbös’s intentions he turned the petition into an expression of acceptable conservatism and forced Gömbös to accept this interpretation, since to do otherwise would have meant breaking all pretence of party unity. In that respect, Bethlen had taken a brilliant gamble, exploiting Gömbös’s unwillingness to enter into open conflict on this issue. Overall, however, the petition had been a disaster for Bethlen. He had angered the Smallholders by failing to consult them on the issue, while the petition itself had given new life to Gömbös’s ambitions by revealing the scope for dissent and disloyalty that existed within the party. Since those who had signed the declaration before 2 October could not have been sure that Bethlen

\(^{90}\) Budapesti Hírlap, 19, 22, 28 September, 1922.
\(^{91}\) Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, p.73; OLK, 429, 12, Situation Report 26 September, 1922; Kardos, Legitimizmus, p.104.
\(^{92}\) Budapesti Hírlap, 3 October, 1922.
approved of their action, they had demonstrated their implicit willingness to challenge government policy. This indicated that Gömbös had sufficient support to mount a real challenge to Bethlen’s authority if he so wished. Bethlen’s attempt to play down the issue with conciliatory language should be regarded as a tactical move rather than an indication of complacency. He was aware of how dangerous the petition had been and, as soon as an element of calm had been restored, he forbade any further collecting of signatures.  

There was, however, from Bethlen’s perspective, a silver lining to all of this. The petition had not received the full support of the right-wing opposition parties. Andrássy refused to play any active role whatsoever in the new Christian Alliance. The Zichy group, for its part, condemned any idea of working with such a prominent free-elector as Gömbös. Even the Friedrich group, while signing the petition, initially described any idea of broad co-operation as ‘laughable’. Furthermore, on this issue at least, there had been no co-operation between the right radicals and the agrarians; indeed it was the agrarians who had chosen to attack the petition. They continued to maintain close links with the liberal opposition, to regard Klebelsberg - a bête noire of the extreme right - as an advocate of their interests, and to remain suspicious of Gömbös’s support for a broader land reform. Bethlen could, therefore, take some consolation from the divisions which continued to bedevil any attempt to launch a concerted challenge to his policies.

Kozma also sought to play down the danger which the new grouping posed to the government. He wrote on 12 October that its importance was being exaggerated and claimed that, ‘primarily on the opposition side too great an importance is ascribed to these events and one of the consequences of this is that the government crisis and the break-up of the Unified Party is now repeatedly mentioned’. He felt that now that Bethlen had returned to Budapest such plans

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93 Budapesti Hírlap, 5 October, 1922.
94 Kardos, Legitimizmus, pp.104-105.
would be crushed. He also argued that in the final analysis the right-radicals were attacking the left, not the government, concluding that it will damage ‘neither the government’s politics nor the government’s composition’.\(^{96}\)

Bethlen’s Response

Nevertheless, Bethlen still needed to regain the initiative. With that in mind, he authorized a counter-offensive against the right-radicals. Leading ministers attacked their demands at a party meeting held at the end of September and even accused Gömbös of seeking to destroy the party. Bethlen did not join in these attacks and he did not even seek to prevent further talk of a Christian Alliance. He declared that he ‘approved of Christian policies [but not] anti-Semitism’. He then held discussions with the right-radicals and dissuaded Gömbös from seeking to create a new parliamentary formation, which would have consisted of those who had signed his petition.\(^{97}\)

Tensions however remained high. The right-radicals were particularly unhappy at the idea that Bethlen had also held discussions with a leading liberal, Rassay, even though he had rejected demands for an immediate liquidation of the secret right-radical organizations. They proceeded to use the opportunity of a parliamentary debate on inflation to criticise government policy. Possibly they were encouraged by reports from Italy of the rising power of Mussolini’s fascist party. Gömbös himself declared ‘I see in every example of Italian fascism the manifestation of a healthy and completely strong national desire’.\(^{98}\)

The government’s response was to flex its muscles by cracking down on the various fascist groups. On 13 October, Rakovszky had a meeting with Friedrich in which he warned that he would not tolerate any illegal fascist

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\(^{96}\) OLK, 429, 12, Situation Report, 12 October, 1922.

\(^{97}\) Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, p.73; Romsics, István Bethlen, p.193; Gergely, Gömbös, p.78.

\(^{98}\) Nagy, Bethlen Liberalis Ellenzéke, p.94; Szózat, 31 October, 1922.
movements. On 5 November he gave a speech in Nyíregyháza in which he demanded that extremism be stamped out on both the left and right wings. On 10 November, the Magyar Fascista Tabor, (Hungarian Fascist Camp), consisting of about 500 members, mostly from Friedrich's party, was banned. This was followed by a letter to all police chiefs and alispáns on 13 November calling for close observation of the fascist movement and reports on their activity. This did not put an end to fascist activity. For example, the surprisingly similar named Magyar Fascista (Hungarista) Tábor, whose members included such figures as the deputy national policy chief and several senior civil servants, continuing to hold meetings. The government's clampdown, however, remained a warning to those on the right who expected the government always to deal with them benevolently. Bethlen also made clear his opposition to fascism, using a speech in Hódmezővásárhely to describe it as an unnecessary foreign institution. This speech appeared to be at odds with Gömbös's praise of Italian fascism but, in public, the two maintained the image of unity, with Gömbös declaring that 'there were no disagreements' between himself and Bethlen.

Kozma sought to minimize any scope for disagreement by playing down both the fascist danger and its links with the right wing. He dismissed fascism as 'more smoke than fire' and wrote that newspaper claims that fascism and the Christian Alliance were one and the same 'do not contain a true word'. Nevertheless, beneath the surface hostilities continued. Kozma recorded on 21 November a discussion with crown prince József Habsburg in which the matter of 'the opposition between Bethlen and Gömbös' was raised. While dissatisfaction with the 'passivity' of foreign policy was mentioned, most worrying was the view that there had been an 'estrangement between Horthy and Bethlen' with Horthy

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99 Budapesti Hírlap, 14 October, 1922
100 OLK, 429, 12 Situation Report, 16 November, 1922.
101 PML, IV, 401a, 17, 41.
102 See for example Budapesti Hírlap, 19 December, 1922.
103 Romsics, István Bethlen, pp.193-194 /
104 OLK, 429, 12, Situation Report, 16 November, 1922.
pushing for a policy ‘shift to the right’ and criticising a number of ministers. While the resignation of the ‘liberal’ foreign minister, Bánffy, in December 1922 reassured the right, the broader question of whether there would be a shift in government policy remained unanswered.

Growing Dissent

By now it was absolutely clear that Bethlen had neither resolved the problem of right-radicalism nor fully appeased the agrarian faction. The agrarians remained unhappy with a number of aspects of the government’s programme such as Rakovszky’s proposal for appointed rather than elected local government officials. The continuing economic crisis only added to their dissatisfaction. Although government reports were quick to note that farmers were not the only group suffering from inflation, that indeed they were perhaps the least affected by price rises, and that they might even be benefiting from hyper-inflation, it was still noted that they complained as much as all the rest.

An indication of growing agrarian concerns came at the end of November 1922 when Bálint Szijj, a respected party figure, supported an opposition motion on the land reform question. The strength of feeling among the agrarians was demonstrated by the fact that Szijj, although criticized at a party meeting on 30 November, received the backing of a number of other agrarians. The army ministry, always vigilant for any signs of dangerous activity, added to government concerns, reporting that a leading Smallholder, János Tankovich, was inciting the peasants in Somogy county. The peasants, it was alleged, had inflicted 7.5 million crowns worth of damage on a large landowner. Bethlen, however, accepted

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105 Nemes, Iratok, ii, pp.104-105.
107 Budapesti Hírlap, 24 November, 1922.
108 OLK, 808, Situation Reports, 72, October, November, 1922.
Nagyatádi-Szabó description of the report as ‘inaccurate’.\textsuperscript{110} Bethlen also moved to offset criticism of the land reform programme. He promised the OMGE that there would be no new reform while at the same time holding out to the Smallholders the hope that the existing legislation would be more speedily implemented.\textsuperscript{111} This was again just enough, when combined with the arrival of the Christmas parliamentary break, to alleviate the problem temporarily.

Gömbös was, however, continuing to make trouble. On 16 December he demanded in parliament that land reform focus on the Jews. He called for them to be limited in agriculture in the same way that they had been limited in the universities. Indeed, his entire speech was bitterly anti-Jewish, using statistics from a book by Alajos Kovacs to emphasize the power of the Jews in Hungary. He even questioned their patriotism by asking why so few had died in the First World War. Although the party strongly defended his speech, commentators regarded it as the outline of a separate, and implicitly non-party programme. This view appeared to be confirmed by Gömbös’s decision to lay out in the \textit{Nemzeti Munkáskönyvtár} a 21-point ‘programme’ including demands for a ‘stricter’ Numerus Clausus, a Christian bank, the ‘Christianization’ of business, chemists and liquor licences only for ‘Hungarians’ and more land for ‘Hungarians’.\textsuperscript{112}

While the government studiously appeared to ignore such provocations the first attack on Gömbös from within the party came in a speech by a Unified Party MP, Samu Mandy, at the end of January 1923. Gömbös himself was forced to admit in a newspaper interview that there was a ‘small’ group of opponents within the party.\textsuperscript{113} Such comments can be viewed as merely the usual jostling for influence which affects all parties from time to time. It can, on the other hand, also be argued that they need to be considered within the framework of an escalating party crisis. In this light, the in-fighting between the factions had now

\textsuperscript{110} OLK, 26, 1313, 49.  
\textsuperscript{111} Nagy, \textit{A Kisgazda csoport}, pp.235-237.  
\textsuperscript{112} Szózat, 14 January, 1923.  
\textsuperscript{113} Szózat, 20 January, 1923.
reached the point where personal attacks were occurring and leading figures were admitting that a degree of disunity and division existed. Bethlen abhorred such publicity and always sought to preserve an image of unity. His failure to prevent the infighting becoming public knowledge suggests that his authority over the party was gradually weakening and the divisions within the party were becoming more pronounced.

Bethlen could, however, take some comfort from the fact that Gömbös was doing little to gain support from the conservative opposition. Gömbös was unable to prevent himself from attacking the legitimists even when he was trying to lay out a programme capable of broad parliamentary support. The agrarian faction, on the other hand, appeared to be moving closer to Gömbös, or at least further away from Bethlen. A key factor now was their growing anger at the slow progress of the land reform. Since the passing of the legislation in 1920, less than 136,000 hold had been redistributed. In January 1923 there were reports, strongly denied, of clashes between Bethlen and Nagyatádi-Szabó. A number of agrarians also gave their backing to the establishment of a cross party Földreform Szövetség, (Land Reform Society), to press for further and faster land reform. The situation was clearly growing dangerous, for such cross party associations directly threatened the discipline of the party and could even serve as the basis for a new Smallholder Party.

Bethlen’s response was to employ his usual tactical cunning. First, he sought to play down the new association saying it was not a threat to the party and that he would happily enter into discussions with its leaders. Next, he ensured that at several party meetings Nagyatádi-Szabó was lauded for his loyalty to the party with ovations and speeches. Finally, he agreed that tax rises on agriculture would be kept to the minimum, that land reform would be speeded up, that there would be further consultation on the bureaucratic reform, and that home-distilling would

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114 Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, p.73; Serfőzö, A MSZDP, p.136
115 Romsics, István Bethlen, p.195.
be neither restricted or taxed. Both sides publicly declared, in return, that party unity was as strong as ever. The crisis appeared to have been resolved. Figures within the government were, however, still aware of the threat that remained. Kozma wrote on 10 February that there was a danger of a right-radical and agrarian coalition, although he noted that the pace of land reform was increasing, with 3000 of the 3,475 districts having at least been surveyed by the OFB. He remained confident that Gömbös still stood with the government. Kozma was also pleased to note later in the month that the opposition was if anything more divided than the government and was primarily occupied, not with the difficulties within the Unified Party, but with ‘fighting each other’.

The economic crisis, however, continued to provide reasons to be dissatisfied with government policy. Unemployment was still rising while a new surge of inflation was described by the social-political department as depressing everyone, ensuring that ‘the most nervous atmosphere dominates’. Meanwhile the large landowners launched a fresh attack in February 1923 on the capital levy and the land reform. The Szozat, which for a long time had condemned the ‘bankocrácia’, added to the pressure on the government by demanding that immediate action be taken, particularly closing the stock exchange. There were also fresh rumours of a government crisis, which Kozma revealingly did not deny, but described only as ‘exaggerated’. Furthermore, Gömbös was still pressing for action on Jewish landowners, demanding that the government operate in a ‘race-defending direction’, [fajvédő irány]. There was even some support for this approach among the bureaucracy. The föispán of Szabolcs county wrote that

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117 OLK, 429, 12, Situation Report, 10 February, 1923.
118 OLK, 429, 12, Situation Report, 22 February, 1923.
119 OLK, 808, 72, Situation Reports, February, March 1923.
120 Szózat, 10 February and 29 March, 1923.
121 OLK, 429, 12, Situation Report, 5 April, 1923.
122 OLK, 468, B/16, 261.
the land reform would hurt Christian land owners and implied that counter-
measures needed to be taken.\textsuperscript{123}

It was clear that the situation was unsustainable and that either the
government or its critics would have to give way.

The Crisis Deepens

Pressure on Bethlen to deal with his critics was increasing. Count József
Mailáth wrote to complain that right-radical newspapers were not aiding
consolidation and questioned how important Gömbös was. He wrote that, even ‘if
he cannot be completely ignored he should at least be neutralized’.\textsuperscript{124} Tensions
were fuelled by the right-radicals’ open criticism of twenty to thirty party MPs for
being insufficiently Christian. Clashes between right-radical students and the
police on 15-16 March 1923 even made some foreign observers fear the fall of the
Bethlen government.\textsuperscript{125}

Batkay writes that these riots were directed against Bethlen, but
contemporary newspaper reports suggest that they stemmed not from any
machinations by Gömbös but rather from the national feeling that erupted with the
15 March celebrations of the 1848 revolution and were targeted primarily at left-
wing newspapers and Jewish students.\textsuperscript{126} The conduct of the police in suppressing
the demonstrations did, however, provoke sharp criticism from the right of the
party. The interior minister was even forced to promise an independent
investigation.\textsuperscript{127} Gömbös also sought to exploit the whole affair politically,
claiming that it proved ‘the need to split from the so-called politics of the middle

\begin{footnotes}
\item[123] OLK, 468, B/16, 362.
\item[124] Szinai and Szücs, Titkos iratai, pp.125-126.
\item[125] OLK, 429, 12, Situation Report, 5 April, 1923; Romsics, István Bethlen, p.194.
\item[126] Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, p.73; Budapesti Hírlap and Az Est, 16-18 March 1923. The
press, including those newspapers which were attacked, did not appear to believe the riots were
targeted at the government and Batkay himself fails to provide any evidence for his assertions.
Lajos Serfőzó claims, however, that these were part of an organized right-radical campaign to put
\item[127] Nemes, Iratok, ii, pp.313-316.
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Then on 25 March the Szózat launched its first direct attack on the government, accusing Bethlen of being ‘mistaken’ and demanding the completion of land reform, a crack down on speculation and banking scandals, credits for agriculture, and the closing down of the liberal press.\textsuperscript{129}

The crisis grew deeper at Easter when another party member, József Wild, wrote an open letter to Gömbös demanding that he abandon his extremist policies or else leave the party. It is probable that this was a personal decision, for there had been mutual dislike stretching over several years. The letter, however, still brought the issue into the open.\textsuperscript{130} On 1 April General Kálmán Shvoy wrote in his diary that ‘in politics a great battle has begun’, and by 5 April Kozma was in no doubt that a ‘political action’ was underway.\textsuperscript{131}

Kozma was, nevertheless, uncertain of the extent of the opposition, writing that most of it was secret agitation. He suspected that Gömbös had the support of twenty to thirty MPs and the Wolff group, although he still concluded ‘that it is difficult to know who will actually take part’. He wrote that the entire party regarded the government’s foreign policy as ‘completely suitable’. On domestic policy, however, an opposition programme had emerged which regarded the government economic policy as ‘insufficiently Christian’ and inadequately supportive of agrarian interests. It demanded, in particular, action against large banks, a sharply anti-inflationary policy, substantial credits for agriculture, faster land reform, and restrictions on the liberal press.

This programme was contradictory in seeking both an infusion of credits and reduced inflation; it also threatened the entire economic policy of expanding industry to achieve long-term growth. Not surprisingly, Kozma was convinced

\textsuperscript{128} Szózat, 18 March, 1923.
\textsuperscript{129} Szózat, 25 March, 1923.
\textsuperscript{130} Budapesti Hírlap, 6 April, 1923.
\textsuperscript{131} Shvoy Kálmán titkos naplója, p.87; Nemes, Iratok, ii, pp.313-316; OLK.429, 12, Situation Report, 5 April 1923.
that Bethlen would reject these demands. Although he admitted that the key to the situation is in Nagyatádi-Szabó’s hand’, Kozma was confident that the Órffy-Schandl group of agrarians would back Bethlen regardless of which way he turned, and that the press would also support the government. He also maintained that relations between Bethlen and Gömbös remained good. He wrote, ‘the struggle is not against Bethlen but for him’.

Tensions can, however, only have been further raised by a cabinet meeting on 6 April at which the government presented its plans for a foreign loan. Bethlen made clear his determination to secure this and he had the support of the government. Klebelsberg wrote privately that the alternative of waiting for complete financial collapse would equally put the country under foreign tutelage. Nevertheless the timing was unfortunate and provided yet another reason, albeit one of many, for the right-radicals to launch a direct challenge to the government.

Kozma had also underestimated the level of dissatisfaction among the agrarian faction which was again increasing due to a lack of progress in economic policy and the impact of agricultural taxation. With a finance bill, [indenmitás], coming before parliament, one agrarian, Dezső Eőri-Szabó, presented a parliamentary motion, [inditvány], calling for key sections of the bill to be rejected. Both the agrarians and the right-radicals were now attacking the government’s economic policy. The news also arrived that Nagyatádi-Szabó had

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132 Elizabeth Boross argues persuasively that the government was not prepared at this time to follow a directly anti-inflationary policy for fear of repeating the Czech example of limiting growth. See Boross, Inflation and Industry in Hungary, 1918-1929, pp.34-37.
133 Nemes, Iratok, ii, pp.313-316; OLK, 429, 12, Situation Report, 5 April 1923
134 Nemes, Iratok, ii, p.382. The issue had been raised at cabinet before, but this was the first time Bethlen laid out his plans to the rest of the government in detail and, while Gombos was not a cabinet member, he must have been informed of what was discussed. See Ormos, Az 1924 évi. Magyar államkölcsőn szervezése, pp.18-19.
135 Archive of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, (MTA) Ms. 4525 588. Mária Ormos also writes that other leading figures such as Miklós Kozma regarded a foreign loan as the only possible solution, See Ormos, Az 1924 évi. Magyar államkölcsőn szervezése, p.14.
136 OLK, 808, 72 Situation Report, April 1923; Balla, A Magyar országgyűlés története, p.481.
reached agreement with the Órffy-Schandl group over the need for a new agrarian policy and had held direct discussions with Gömbös.\textsuperscript{137}

The success of these negotiations became evident when Gömbös informed Bethlen that he would introduce a motion of no-confidence against him at the forthcoming party conference scheduled for 11 April 1923. It is highly unlikely that he would have taken such a step unless he believed he had the necessary support to bring down the government. A unified opposition, which represented the greatest danger to the survival of Bethlen and his political programme, was now gathered against him.\textsuperscript{138}

The 11 April Meeting

For Batkay the situation was resolved by a series of meetings which Bethlen held with the different factions. At these meetings, a deal was negotiated whereby Bethlen would consider proposals by the different groups and implement those that were practical.\textsuperscript{139}

This summary overlooks, however, the brilliance of Bethlen’s tactical manoeuvring in advance of the 11 April party meeting. First, he used public opinion to strengthen his position. A meeting was held in Budapest on 9 April, organized by the government-supporting mayor, which proclaimed its support for the government and its ‘Christian national tendency’.\textsuperscript{140} Then, on 10 April, a party dinner was held at which no political discussion was permitted but Bethlen was given a carefully choreographed standing ovation and several congratulatory speeches. The intention, as the Budapesti Hírlap reported, was to ensure that ‘the appearance of unity would be complete’. Immediately after the dinner, Bethlen

\textsuperscript{137} While no records of these discussions have survived, on the basis of a speech Gömbös gave on 21 April, it seems likely that he was proposing a radical extension of the land reform by using not only the capital levy but also confiscating any large estates acquired during the previous fifty years. See Szózat, 21 April, 1923.
\textsuperscript{138} Budapesti Hírlap and Az Est 11-13 April, 1923.
\textsuperscript{139} Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, pp.74-75.
\textsuperscript{140} Források Budapest Történetéhez, p.100.
began extensive discussions lasting until 2 a.m. and which continued after day break.141

Negotiating with each group, one by one, Bethlen appeared to show his contempt for Gőmbös’s challenge, dispatching a letter demanding his immediate resignation from his post as executive vice-president of the party. He then offered the agrarians an immediate allocation of 5.5 billion crowns of agricultural credits with a further 30-40 billion crowns over the coming years. He also promised to give Nagyatádi-Szabó free rein to draw up a modified and expanded land reform bill. There were even moves to reconcile the agrarians to bureaucratic reform and to address their concern that any changes would only increase the central government’s control over the administration. A compromise was almost certainly agreed, which was reflected in the interior minister’s speech at the party meeting. He declared that, although ‘it is impossible that the old conditions be maintained’, he refused to believe that the local bureaucracy should be entirely in the hands of the government ‘against which it practices a certain amount of power’.142

By 2.p.m on the day of the meeting Bethlen had regained the agrarians’ support and they made a joint public statement of unity. Only then did he return to an increasingly isolated Gőmbös, offering to withdraw his demand for Gőmbös’s resignation if, in return, the motion of non-confidence would be withdrawn. It was however only in a final meeting, 90 minutes before the full party meeting, (at which only Bethlen and his close supporter Gedeon Ráday, Meyer representing the agrarian faction, Gőmbös, and the speaker of the house Béla Scitovszky were present), that it was agreed that an open split would be avoided.143

For Batkay this was enough to turn the meeting that evening into what he describes as an ‘anti-climatic formality at which tame formalities were invoked to save face’, with Bethlen declaring his support for a ‘Christian agrarian policy’,

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141 Budapesti Hírlap and Az Est, 11 April 1923.
142 Hungarian text is ‘Amint lehetetlen a régi állapotok fenntartása, és a pátriarchális vármegeyerendszer megreformalandó, úgy az sem lehetséges hogy a közigazgatás döntőleg azon elemektől függenél melyekkel szemben bizonyos hatalmat gyakorol’.
143 Nemes, Iratok, ii, pp.316-318; Budapesti Hírlap and Az Est 12-13 April, 1923.
rejecting any government reshuffle, forcing Eőri-Szabó to withdraw his motion of no-confidence in the finance bill, and getting another motion accepted which condemned those who publicly criticized government policy.144

A different picture, however, emerges from Kozma’s report of the meeting. Kozma was full of praise for Bethlen’s performance, describing him as a ‘very astute, clever, cunning, impassive politician who completely dominates the present situation’. He also noted Gömbös’s declaration that he didn’t want to damage the party. However he also reported that Bethlen was personally attacked for pursuing an un-Christian policy, for improper economics, and for failing to consult the party on decisions.145 He worried that although the party was generally united, divisions remained on the Jewish question and the majority of the party were secretly supporters of Gömbös. He also claimed that there were severe problems with the agrarians who were potentially more dangerous than even the right-radicals.146 While he described the supporters of Nagyatádi-Szabó as ‘good Christians’ who deferred to Bethlen, he also admitted in his diary the day after the meeting that had a vote taken place the entire agrarian faction would have voted with the right-radicals.147

Bethlen was certainly fortunate that there was no sustained criticism of his controversial plans for a foreign loan. Gömbös confined himself to a call to ‘postpone the clearing up of these differences of opinion’, while Bethlen promised that he would do nothing that damaged the nation’s sovereignty.148 Nevertheless, Kozma still concluded that the whole episode had strengthened the right-radicals. For him, the question now was not whether they would leave the party but in what numbers. Fifteen defections, he wrote, would be ‘dangerous’ and fifty would destroy the party. Far from being the ‘anti-climatic formality’ Batkay would have

144 Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, pp.74-75; Antal Balla claims that Bethlen used the threat of resignation to secure victory but this is not mentioned in other reports of the meeting. See Balla, A Magyar országgyűlés története, p.481.
145 OLK, 429, 3, 34/74.
146 OLK, 429, 3, 74.
147 OLK, 429, 3, 78 and 46, 153-154.
148 Ormos, A 1924. évi Magyar államkölcsön szervezése, p.41.
us believe, contemporary observers now believed Horthy was the last hope of averting the break-up of the party. As Kozma’s report makes clear, Bethlen had done enough to avoid being seriously damaged by the meeting but he still remained in an extremely dangerous situation.

Bethlen Asserts Control.

It was Bethlen’s great good fortune that the parliamentary calendar now came to the rescue. The advent of the Easter parliamentary break, which began on 28 April 1923, reduced the opportunity for further party infighting. A more positive atmosphere was also produced by Bethlen’s lengthy foreign trip which placed the emphasis on a less contentious area of foreign policy, enhanced his position as a statesman able to present Hungary’s position in the capitals of Europe, and was roundly proclaimed ‘a great success’. He also learned from his experience the previous September and left the party under the control of the respected justice minister Géza Daruváry who ensured that no awkward issues were discussed at the weekly party meetings. These were in any case poorly attended as many MPs chose to visit their constituencies or go on holiday.

There were, however, still signs that dissatisfaction remained rife within the party. In early May the newspapers carried rumours that Nagyatádi-Szabó and his supporters would leave the party and reports of a number of meetings by disaffected Smallholders in Zala county led by a former MP János Novák. Upon his return, Bethlen moved swiftly to respond to this challenge offering to meet Novák to discuss his concerns. On a wider level he authorized Schandl to develop a plan for providing the promised agricultural credits and firmly rejected the OMGE’s claims that Nagyatádi-Szabó’s new land reform proposals

149 OLK, 429, 3, 79.
150 Serfőzö, A MSZDP, p.65.
151 OLK, 468, B/16, 31.
152 OLK, 468, B/16, 38.
153 Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, p.75.
were socially and economically destructive and would lead to bolshevism.\textsuperscript{154} Smallholder dissatisfaction was also assuaged by the increasing pace of the land reform which had resulted in over 170 thousand hold being distributed in the first four months of the year.\textsuperscript{155}

It was, however, the question of the foreign loan which seemed most likely to cause fresh problems for the government. The Szózat attacked the whole idea but the government made clear its determination to follow the policy through. The minister of finance, Kállay, informed the reparations committee on 4 May that 'in respect of the means by which the situation may be remedied we can come to only one conclusion and that is the taking up of a foreign loan'.\textsuperscript{156}

Surprisingly, when the party met on 11 May, to consider the impact of the first of Bethlen's foreign trips, the loan issue appears not to have featured in discussions. Instead, the meeting reiterated the decision of 11 April that any disputes should be kept out of the public glare. Gömbös now proclaimed his loyalty to Bethlen. He declared that it was 'necessary and important that now, when the government stands before the fulfilment of its serious tasks, [that] the unity and prestige of the party must not be disturbed'.\textsuperscript{157} This appeal for unity could, however, be interpreted in two ways: either as a sign of his unwillingness to disturb unity or as a warning to Bethlen to solve the 'serious tasks' if he did not want party unity to be fractured.

Certainly, the situation was still serious enough for Batkay to claim that it was only Horthy's intervention that persuaded Gömbös not to leave the party at the end of May.\textsuperscript{158} However, Gömbös's continuing failure to move against Bethlen ensured that his position continually weakened, especially as the agrarian faction was now relatively happy with government policy. Criticism of a foreign loan was unlikely to appeal to them as, like most of the party, they saw it as an

\textsuperscript{154} Romsics, István Bethlen, p.196; Karsai, A budai Sándor-palótában történt, p.109.
\textsuperscript{155} Budapesti Hírlap, 1 May, 1923.
\textsuperscript{156} Ormos, Az 1924. évi magyar államkölcsön megszerzése, p.16.
\textsuperscript{157} Nemes. Iratok, ii, p.318.
\textsuperscript{158} Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, p.76.
absolute, albeit painful, necessity. Seizing the initiative, Bethlen engaged in no further negotiations with Gömbös and instead wrote to him on 15 June 1923 demanding that he either leave the party or resign his post as deputy president and subordinate himself to the leadership.\textsuperscript{159} Still unwilling to leave the party, he chose to resign and was replaced by a reliable old parliamentarian, László Almássy. Kozma could even write at the end of June that the momentum of the challenge to the government had passed.\textsuperscript{160}

No clear explanation has been offered why, for the time being, Gömbös accepted the indignity of being forced to resign, although the blow may have been softened by press reports that it was a voluntary decision which merited only minimum coverage.\textsuperscript{161} It is possible that Gömbös realized that he had lost the initiative and hoped to regain it before finally breaking away. Alternatively, it is plausible that Gömbös always believed in seeking influence from within the party by exploiting dissent to influence policy formation, aware that to leave the party would be to reduce his position to that of just another opposition leader.

Certainly Gömbös did not allow his ‘resignation’ to prevent him criticising the government. At a party dinner on 2 July, he spoke of the ‘differences which continue to exist’ and promised he would ‘constantly struggle’ for his values.\textsuperscript{162} In private correspondence with Bethlen, he expressed particular concern about plans to supervise the operations of the MOVE and to place priority on expanding the scouting movement.\textsuperscript{163} He also used his influence within the party to force its finance committee, [közgazdasági bizottság], to call ministers to account on their proposals for solving the agricultural crisis. The expected confrontation however failed to take place as the government succeeded in calming the committee with indefinite promises of future action.\textsuperscript{164}

\textsuperscript{159} OLK, 468, B/1, 431.
\textsuperscript{160} OLK, 429, 12, Situation Report, 30 June 1923.
\textsuperscript{161} See Szózat and Budapesti Hírlap, 20 June, 1923.
\textsuperscript{162} Szózat, 4 July, 1923.
\textsuperscript{163} OLK, 468, B/1, 1239.
\textsuperscript{164} Szózat, 17, 19 July, 1923.
Bethlen continued to play down any differences, claiming that divisions between them only existed on the Jewish question.\(^{165}\) Nevertheless a sign of his mounting confidence came on 10 July when an article appeared in the Népszava, written by the Bolshevik émigré Vilmos Böhm, claiming that Gömbös had affirmed his belief in the republic and ‘national socialism’ during the Räterrepublik. Bethlen moved to preserve Gömbös’s reputation, temporarily banning the Népszava on the grounds that the accusations were not even deserving of public exposure.\(^{166}\) It was a mark of a man firmly in control. Bethlen could have allowed Gömbös to be besmirched by scandal, but he clearly regarded that step as unnecessary. Kozma still worried that restlessness within the party was once again increasing,\(^{167}\) and Gergely claims that even at this late point Gömbös was still counting on one hundred supporters. On 2 August Gömbös finally moved against Bethlen. At a party meeting he presented a motion of no confidence in the government but this was rejected by seventy-six votes against to only four in favour. Leaving the meeting Gömbös immediately announced his resignation from the party; only five other MPs left with him.\(^{168}\)

**Limiting Further Disunity**

While Bethlen had minimized the damage from Gömbös’s departure from the party, he still needed to ensure that no other MPs followed Gömbös’s example. He therefore demonstrated how vulnerable dissent was when it moved outside the protective umbrella of the Unified Party. He authorized the authorities to take the kind of action against the right-radical organizations that they had practised on other opposition movements such as the socialists.

\(^{165}\) Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, p.76.
\(^{166}\) Serfozo, A MSZDP, pp.168-169.
\(^{167}\) OLK, 429, 12, Situation Report, 10 September 1923
\(^{168}\) Gergely, Gömbös, pp.147-152; Balla, A Magyar országgyűlés története, p.481; Budapesti Hirlap, 3 August, 1923.
Revelations about a half-baked plot by another right-radical Ferenc Ulain to overthrow the government provided the immediate pretext for action. On 6 August the right-radical Nép newspaper was banned for six days. A week later, the interior minister ordered the authorities to send reports of all ÉME meetings and to prevent any which dealt with political questions. Rakovszky even ordered that if a speaker at an authorized meeting did begin to deal with politics then the meeting should be broken up. Then, on 30 August, twenty-four ÉME members were arrested amid accusations that another coup attempt was in the making. For good measure, the government also forbade all civil servants from joining the ÉME.169

A fresh crackdown on the ÉME occurred after a series of bombings culminated in the killing of one person and the injuring of thirteen others at a Jewish women’s meeting in Csongrád on 26 December. Following this atrocity, the police again arrested a number of ÉME members. Elements within the government continued, however, to view the ÉME benignly. Kozma, for example, claimed that leading ÉME members such as Héjjas had co-operated with the police who were investigating the bombing. For him this showed that the bombing had been a ‘criminal’ rather than a political action and that the ÉME should still be regarded as both democratic and patriotic.

Government rhetoric, however, revealed a growing impatience with the excesses of right-radicalism. Horthy declared on 21 August that ‘in this country order is needed and I will maintain order. I will have law-breakers shot and if the disorder comes from the right, for me the only difference is that I will have them shot with a painful heart, whereas if disorder comes from the left it will be with passion’. He also gave his full backing to Bethlen’s policies, declaring that to ensure the success of the ‘great political conception the politics of the possible

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169 Budapesti Hírlap, 1, 2 September, 1923. Serfőző, ‘A titkos tarsaságok’, pp.82-83; PML, IV 401a 18, 38; Nemes, Iratok, ii, p.110.
needs to be carried out, that which Bethlen is carrying out’. The government-supporting press also showed its teeth, launching a series of strong attacks on the right-radicals.

Concerns still remained about the danger of a united right-wing opposition, particularly after Gömbös succeeded in forming a Keresztény Ellenzéki Blokk, (Christian Opposition Block), on 23 August 1923. Another long parliamentary break, however, was regarded as having calmed tensions. There was also an awareness that on the loan issue the country strongly supported the government. Meanwhile the right-wing opposition began to break apart as the Wolff and Ernstorff factions in the Christian Opposition Block moved towards supporting the government rather than Gömbös on this issue.

While the challenge from the right was being dealt with, the agrarian question continued to cause problems for the government. The OMGE continued its attacks on land reform and the government's proposals in this area were almost defeated in parliament. At the same time there were moves within the party, led by Eőri-Szabó, to reform the Land Reform Society to press for further land reform. A number of agrarians and liberals swiftly pledged their support, and the possibility once again arose that they would form an independent Smallholder party.

It is, however, easy to overestimate the danger that the agrarians would break away. Their general conservatism ensured that there was little to tie them to the liberal opposition beyond a mutual support for further land reform. Furthermore, there was still strong support for the government among the agrarians - even Eőri-Szabó’s planned group intended to continue supporting the

\[\text{\footnotesize\cite{OLK, 429, 12, Situation Report, 11 April 1924.}}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize\cite{OLK, 808, 72, Situation Report, November, 1923 and OLK. 429, 12, Situation Report, 22 December, 1923.}}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize\cite{OLK, 429, 4, 99-101. Hungarian text is 'A rendetlenkedőkbe belelővetek sa ha a rendetlenség a jobboldalról történik számomra a különbség csak annyi hogy ezekbe fajó szívvel fogok belelővetni mig egy esetleg baloldalról jövő rendetlenkedésbe passzívál'.}}\]
government. There were reports that in south-west Hungary, the stronghold of Nagyatádi-Szabó’s support, some Smallholders were also trying to recreate the old party. The government, however, appears to have regarded the whole thing as not particularly serious. It is also questionable whether ‘grass-roots’ Smallholders were really ready to turn against the government. A report on the merger of the two main Smallholder organizations in October 1923, the _Falu Országos Szövetség_, (National Village Association), and the _Országos Földmives Szövetség_, (National Landworker Association), described them as strongly supportive of the government. Most important of all, Bethlen showed no sign of going back on his promise to allow further land reform. So long as the government remained committed to authorizing such a reform, the agrarian faction would remain within the party.

The situation was however serious enough for the government to seek to limit parliamentary discussion about land reform. Kozma candidly admitted that the strength of popular feeling was the real reason for the government’s rejection of a request for an emergency debate on the subject before the autumn parliamentary break. This was followed by claims that a busy parliamentary schedule required debate to be further restricted before Christmas.

It is not surprising that dissatisfaction within the party continued to make itself felt. The country continued to suffer from the economic crisis, with the prime minister’s social-political department writing in the autumn of 1923 of further horrible price rises, and of wages failing to keep up with inflation. In January 1924 it simply declared that ‘business and commercial life have stagnated’.

It is, nevertheless, a sign of how well the government retained its grip that Kozma could write in February 1924 that ‘the party is really unified [and] is

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176 Ibid.  
177 OLK, 468, B/12, 1923/4.  
178 OLK, 429, 12, Situation Reports, 21 September, 1923 and 22 December, 1923.  
179 OLK, 808, 72, Situation Reports October, December, 1923 and January, 1924.
completely in the prime minister’s hands’. This view was also shared by critics of the regime with Népszava arguing that since the break with Gömbös the party had actually become ‘more compact [and] stronger’. Furthermore concerns that the right-radicals would split the conservative vote in elections remained unfounded. The Unified Party continued to win by-elections, even though in a number of cases the right-radicals provided the strongest opposition.

Conclusion

In retrospect, Kozma felt that the crisis could have been avoided if Bethlen had not committed the mistake of focusing on foreign policy, forgetting about the need for domestic unity. Horthy is also reported to have regarded the split as unfortunate and hoped that Gömbös would be able to return. Government reports by Kozma and the social political department suggested that the real beneficiaries of the whole crisis were the liberal socialist opposition and the Jews who regarded the whole dispute with joy.

The tone of these reports, with their general view that the whole crisis had been highly unfortunate, goes against the idea that Bethlen created the crisis for his own benefit. As we have seen the crisis arose because the party was not under Bethlen’s absolute control, was divided into factions, and one of these factions, the right-radicals, was ideologically at odds with the policies advocated by Bethlen. This became increasingly manifest as the euphoria of election victory died away and the focus returned to the question of how the country should be governed. Throughout 1921, during the formation of the Unified Party, the arguments over electoral reform, and the long election campaign, Bethlen and

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180 OLK, 429, 12, Situation Report, 14 February 1924.
181 Serf z , A MSZDP, p.183.
182 OLK, 429, 30 June, 1925.
184 Nemes, Iratok, ii, pp.324-326.
185 OLK, 429, 12, Situation Report, 21 September, 1923 and OLK. 808, 72, Situation Report, October, 1923.
Gömöös had combined to defeat common enemies. However, such successes, and the ensuing dominance of the Unified Party’s position, meant that Bethlen now had the means to carry out a right-radical agenda. His refusal to do so could not, therefore, be explained away by the weaknesses of the political system. Instead, it became ever more clear that Bethlen had no intention of altering his cautious, centrist course. By the summer of 1923, sidelined by demotion and unable to form a united front with the other dissatisfied grouping within the party, Gömöös’s and his supporters’ patience finally ran out and they left the party.

There was, however, another underlying cause of the 1922-1923 party crisis. It involved a clash between two conceptions of how the Unified Party should function. For the right-radical, and to a lesser extent the agrarian, factions, the party’s electoral success and political dominance provided it with an opportunity to advance a particular ideological agenda. For Bethlen, however, the party’s success and dominance was due precisely to not allowing any faction to advance its own particular agenda. By preventing any one faction’s agenda from dominating the party, Bethlen was able to preserve the ‘broad-church’ nature of the Unified Party and retain its appeal among different segments of conservative opinion. In driving the most extreme right-radicals out of the party, Bethlen was ensuring that his conception of the Unified Party, successfully following the pre-war model of the Tisza governing party, would continue.

In overcoming the right-radical challenge another element of Bethlen’s policy-making came to the fore. He was prepared to alter his position on secondary questions to realize his most important objectives, the preservation of party unity and the continuing functioning of the party, as a moderate, broad-based, traditional governing party. To achieve this he altered the government’s policies, so that although he had clashed with the agrarian faction in autumn 1922 and forced the speaker of parliament to resign from the party, by April 1923 he was pursuing a pro-agrarian programme.
The earlier focus on anti-inflationary policies was replaced by an infusion of agricultural credits. Renewed talk of restoring the upper house was once again dropped off the parliamentary agenda. Administrative reform was repeatedly postponed while a plan acceptable to the agrarians could be drawn up. The change of direction is, however, most apparent in Bethlen’s approach to the question of land reform. For someone who had once compared land reform to the theft of one’s coat, his decision to defend the extension of the land reform represents a truly remarkable political about turn.\(^{186}\) Whereas historians have overlooked or discounted the challenge to Bethlen in 1922-1923, he himself was well aware of the seriousness of the danger: that is why he altered his government’s policies sufficiently to ensure the continued support of the agrarian faction. It was not Bethlen’s ‘enormous power’ that kept the party unified, it was his tactical skill, a degree of good fortune, and the mistakes of his opponents that preserved the unity of the party and his own position as prime minister.

\(^{186}\) Romsics, István Bethlen, p.195.
Chapter 5 - Bethlen’s Attempt to Expand the Unified Party Organization

Introduction

The previous chapter considered how Bethlen worked to maintain a key element of the old governing party of the two Tiszas - the broad-based, moderate coalition. This chapter examines Bethlen’s failed attempt to modernize the party by expanding the local party organization.

This chapter will begin with an evaluation of earlier historical research on this question. It will then consider why Bethlen sought to expand the party and how he intervened personally to get the process moving. It will then proceed to analyse the difficulties that the drive for party expansion encountered, and continue by examining whether substantial progress was actually made. It will then consider what role, if any, the party had in the Bethlen government and what alternatives were used to compensate for the lack of a modern party structure. Finally, the chapter will consider why the drive to expand the party failed to provide a real role for the party within the Bethlen government.

Historical Assessments of the Functioning of the Unified Party Organization

A re-evaluation of the role of the Unified Party organization is particularly important because earlier analysis has been hindered by several problems. For one thing, the whole question of how the party functioned has been generally overlooked. There is a substantial amount of primary source material, (particularly for the 1922-1923 period), contained in the correspondence between the prime minister’s office and the local administration. Too many historians, however, have dealt with, and effectively dismissed, the question in a few pages, or more usually a few sentences. The one exception is Batkay’s book on the Bethlen system which devotes a whole
chapter to party formation, but his arguments are weakened by a reliance on published sources.

Also, so many of the arguments presented - not only by Marxist historians - start from the premise that Bethlen could never provide a role for the Unified Party organization in his system because he could never create a truly popular party in the first place. Nemes claimed that 'what is strikingly missing [from Bethlen’s ideas] is the setting of any concrete political goal with which [the party] should attempt to stand before the masses, which is absolutely essential for any kind of movement becoming a nation-wide political movement. They could not create a national movement because, for example, the sabotage of the land reform required not a movement but rather the suppression of movements'.

Ilona Pándi’s reformulation of this argument goes straight to the point. She simply states ‘organizationally the party remained flimsy until the end; a fascist mass party could not be established from within it’. Szinai and Szűcs also accept Nemes’ conclusion arguing that, ‘After the revolutions, as well as the whipping up of the peasants’ expectations with promises of land reform, after the sabotage of the land reform and the swallowing of the Smallholder Party, with the consequences of rising inflation, the supporters of Bethlen came within months to the realization that the expansion of the government party’s local organizations was not a route that they could travel’.

Non-Marxist historians also repeated the core of this argument. Batkay concluded that the ‘exercise’ was ‘incapable of integrating the mass of the population into the political system over the long run’, and Romsics wrote that ‘circumstances in Hungary would not allow the realization of a mass party with a conservative programme’.

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1 Nemes, Iratok, ii, pp.102-103.
2 Pándi, Osztályok és Pártok, p.160.
3 Szinai, Bethlen politikai rendszéréről, p.484.
5 Romsics, István Bethlen, pp.187-188.
In essence, all these historians maintain that unpopular ideologies cannot create modern parties. However, the apparent simplicity of the argument conceals a fundamental flaw: it is built on two unproven yet interlocking premises.

The first premise is that the government was unpopular. This is primarily an ideological position which stems from a belief that conservatism could never be genuinely popular. This viewpoint must be treated with considerable scepticism. It is of course extremely difficult to gauge the levels of popularity of parties in a period before opinion polls and universal suffrage. An analysis of electoral results is also complicated, as we have seen, by suggestions that open-ballot voting artificially inflated the support for the Unified Party. Nevertheless, even in the opposition stronghold and secret ballot districts of Budapest, the government still obtained a not insignificant 23% of the vote.\(^6\) The Unified Party also placed great emphasis on being the representative of rural rather than urban values. It is therefore likely to have been more popular in the countryside where the majority of the population lived. Therefore even if we take into account the effect of the open ballot, we can still conclude that the Unified Party was the most popular party in large swathes of the country.\(^7\)

The second premise is that ideologies must be extremely popular for a broad-based party to develop. Yet the Action Française, which won less than 5% of the seats in the 1919 elections in France, had 'over 300 sections [consisting of at least forty members, a committee and permanent meeting place] propaganda centres and representatives'. This was also steadily increasing with another fifty-three sections being formed between 1923 and 1927.\(^8\) In contrast, the Unified Party had all the advantages of being the party of government and had the support of somewhat more than five percent of voters. It therefore strains credibility to suggest that Bethlen would never be able to form a party structure similar to that of the Action Française merely because he pursued unpopular economic policies or failed to enact a radical


\(^7\) For a more in-depth discussion of voting in the 1922 parliamentary elections and further analysis of the respective popularity of the various parties see Chapter 3, István Bethlen and the 1922 elections.

\(^8\) Eugen Weber, Action Française, Stanford, pp.129, 178 and 260.
land reform. In this light, the issue of popularity, seems at best a distraction and at worst a deliberate attempt at avoiding a comprehensive analysis. Bethlen’s failure to expand and modernize the party was due not to the party’s unpopularity but to the way such modernization was carried out.

Motives for Expanding the Party

We need now to consider why Bethlen felt compelled to embark upon the process of party expansion in the first place. It should be noted that there is no record of Bethlen clarifying precisely what the aims of party expansion actually were. This may be because a large amount of documents relating to the Unified Party no longer exist. It is possible that he was influenced by the growing power of governing parties in other European countries. Alternatively, he may have been influenced by other figures in the government, although there is no evidence either to support or contradict this supposition. One key factor, however, was a belief that the old style of governing party, which he had successfully reconstructed, was incapable of dealing with a changing political environment.

The Unified Party constructed by Bethlen, just like the pre-war governing party of the two Tiszas, effectively lacked a national, local organization, beyond the former headquarters of the old Smallholder party in Budapest. Indeed it may be more appropriate to talk of a government ‘club’, rather than to use the term ‘party’. The club was generally confined to the capital. In the countryside, the party was represented by informal groups of local notables. During elections they helped to nominate candidates, engaged in electioneering, and formed local election committees. Between election campaigns, however, there was little sign of any local party activity. The most important representatives of the party in the countryside were usually to be found in the local administration.

As we have seen, Bethlen ensured that, just as in the old Tisza governing party, the administration functioned in the party’s interest. Its involvement in securing
the Unified Party's 1922 election victory suggested that the administration was once again an extension of the governing party's apparatus. The inter-linking of the party with the administration was further strengthened by Bethlen's appointment of Iván Rakovszky as the new interior minister in July 1922. Rakovszky had been a consistently loyal supporter of Bethlen, joining him in seeking to form a new party as early as 1922. Furthermore, before he entered the cabinet, he had also been the acknowledged spokesman of the administration, as his earlier clashes with the Smallholders over administrative reform had demonstrated.

From Bethlen's perspective, however, the Tisza model of the party as the inter-linking of government, party club, and the administration was insufficient. The 1922 election had witnessed the use of a reformed voting system in which the franchise was extended from 6% to 29.5% of the adult population, along with the introduction of the secret ballot and list voting. Such comparatively radical changes seemed to demand a modernized party structure capable of responding to the new circumstances. This was confirmed by the performance of the Unified Party. Although it secured a majority of the seats, it did so with less than 50% of the vote. In contrast the MSZDP surpassed most expectations by becoming the largest opposition party in the parliament. It was also the one opposition party which came complete with all the trappings of a modern party system: party conferences, secretaries, local branches and committees and a centralized control structure.

Nemes claims that Bethlen's primary motivation for expanding the party was a fear of communist agitation. This seems to be an attempt to over emphasize the role of the communists. A much more important factor was the increasing power of the MSZDP, which becomes clear in a letter Bethlen sent to Gömbös, reminding him of the reasons for expanding the party. In this letter Bethlen contrasted the way in which the MSZDP used their party organization with the pre-war system of electioneering

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9 FML, I, 70, 26.
10 Maurice Duverger makes the same point on a theoretical level in his seminal work: see Duverger, Political Parties, London, 1959, pp.xxiii-xxiv.
11 Nemes, Iratok, i, p.100.
still being conducted by the Unified Party. He wrote ‘now, when social democracy reaches out its tentacles in every direction, the old system, [which required] that we occupy ourselves with the voter only at election time, and the party branch [was] only created for the elections, cannot be maintained’. In other words Bethlen recognized the additional value that a modern party structure could provide as a source of propaganda and influence upon the electorate. The Unified Party would, therefore, no longer be concerned only with winning elections, as the pre-war governing party of the two Tiszas had been. Bethlen now sought to provide another dimension to the party’s activities, using an expanded local organization to cultivate active popular support as a counter-weight to the propaganda activities of the MSZDP.

The Beginning of Party Expansion

Almost immediately after forming the Unified Party on 2 February 1922, Bethlen began seeking to compensate for the lack of a party network. He handed control of the election campaign not to the interior minister (as had been the custom) but to Gömbös, whose only official position was the party post of executive vice-president, [ügyvezetõ alelnök]. During the elections it was formally the party not the government which directed the főispáns in how to secure an election victory. Bethlen also encouraged the formation of local party branches, using such occasions to make campaign speeches, and spoke of the need to ‘organize the party’.

When the elections were over, responsibility for further party organization was passed back to the interior ministry. It is possible that this was because Bethlen was receiving complaints about Gömbös’s organizing ability. In any case, it was the new interior minister, Rakovszky, who held the first post-election meetings with the

12 OLK, 28, 448, 111.
13 The interior minister generally ran the governing parties election campaign although in 1872 the campaign appears to have been run by the minister of finance Menyhért Lönyay. See Gerő, The Hungarian Parliament, p.67.
14 Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, p.37
főispáns, on 2 and 22 July, to discuss how the party should be expanded. Batkay also states that the question was addressed at a party conference at the end of June.\textsuperscript{16} The intention seems to have been to keep the főispáns involved by asking them to generate ideas for expanding the party. Bethlen wrote to Rakovszky on 10 August asking him to forward on any suggestions from the főispáns he had received.\textsuperscript{17} Only one such suggestion, however, appears to have been received,\textsuperscript{18} and, presumably impatient with the delay and the lack of co-operation, Bethlen decided to take control of the process. In a letter to all főispáns, sent on 16 September, he laid out his plans for turning the party into a truly national organization.

Bethlen began by reaffirming the national nature of the party, declaring that ‘our party works on the basis of national traditions’ and must work against ‘destructive ambitions, especially among the working classes’. He then discussed different ways in which such destructive propaganda could be resisted and proposed as one solution the expansion of the party organization. He wrote that the party should extend into every community, district and county, and include all circles [körökök], societies, local government leaders and representatives of every social class. Even where opposition parties dominated a locality, ‘confidential persons’ were still to be used to form the party. He also gave guidelines on how the party should operate once formed. Monthly or fortnightly meetings were to be held to lay out the ‘political direction’, with lectures and the reading of pamphlets. A special task of the főispáns was to confront opposition propaganda through the press and these party circles. One paper in every county was to be used to support the party, and the főispáns were required to provide reports on the progress they were making.\textsuperscript{19}

Bethlen underlined how important he regarded the expansion of the party by declaring that the főispáns should regard this as ‘one of their most important political tasks’. He also hoped that their work would be aided by such pro-government

\textsuperscript{16} OLK, 468, B/1, 1323; and Budapesti Hírlap, June 23, 1922; Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, p.46.
\textsuperscript{17} OLK, 468, B/1, 1324.
\textsuperscript{18} OLK, 468, B/1, 1323.
\textsuperscript{19} PML, IV 401a, 17, 25; Nemes, Iratok, ii, p.306; Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, p.38.
organizations as the *Hangya*, the *Faluszövetség* (Village Association), the FOSZ, and by sporting and patriotic associations like the scouts and the MOVE. These would provide members for the party and help disseminate propaganda.

Although he urged the főispáns to use the ‘help and assistance’ of MPs, Bethlen’s only references to a centrally directed party structure were his call for a national conference made up of county delegations, and the requirement that local party secretaries be appointed by party headquarters. From later reports of the főispáns we can conclude that a three-tiered structure was envisioned. Overseeing the party would be the party headquarters in Budapest and the főispáns who would work together to appoint the local party secretaries. There would then be a party organization in each county, and, finally, a branch of the party in each constituency with members drawn from the relevant locality.

Neither in Bethlen’s letter, however, nor, it appears later, were the relationships between the constituency, county, party headquarters and the administration made clear. The primary objective of the exercise seems to have been to use the administration and various interest groups to turn the old system of occasional election committees into as many permanently functioning party branches as possible. Beyond this, Bethlen’s plan was vague and probably not very well thought through. Apart from what appear to be a few afterthoughts - the holding of lectures, reading of pamphlets, sending delegates to a national conference - there was no clear vision of what the party’s actual role at the local level should be.

Some historians have argued that, although this letter was signed by Bethlen, the plan for party expansion was actually worked out by Gömbös. Sándor Konya argues that, as Gömbös was officially in charge of party organization, he must have been in charge of developing the ideas for party expansion. There are, however, three reasons to be sceptical of this assessment. First, as we have already seen, responsibility for organizing the party had passed from Gömbös to the interior

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20 Sándor Konya, Gömbös kísérlete totális fasiszta diktatúra megteremtésére, Budapest, 1968, pp.89-90. See also Sipos, A Magyar ellenforradalmi rendszer kormánypártjairól, pp.228-229.
ministry for a period after the elections and it is therefore reasonable to assume that Bethlen himself was now intervening to get the process moving. Secondly, the emphasis placed on the role of the főispáns, and the merely passing references to the role of party headquarters, suggests that it was either the interior minister or the prime minister who had exerted the real influence in drawing up the plan of action. Thirdly, Bethlen's letter to Gömbös of January 1923 (discussed above), laying out the benefits of party expansion, suggests that Bethlen was the primary advocate of this policy, not Gömbös.

Obstacles to Party Expansion

Reliance on existing organizations to help expand the party organization appeared sensible considering how many of these organizations were active. A report on pro-government organizations in Nógrád and Hont county, included the MOVE, the Keresztény Nemzeti Liga, (Christian National League), the Ifjúsági Levente Unió, (Levente Union of Youth), the Nógrád Megyei Nemzeti Intézet, (Nógrád County National Institute), the Madách Irodalmi Társaság, (Madách Literary Society), three Keresztény Női Egyesület, (Women’s Societies), various religious youth organizations, 142 branches of the Hangya, 24 branches of the Országos Központi Hitelszövetkezet, (National Central Credit Co-operative) and the Balassagyarmat Takarékpénztár, (Balassagyarmat Savings Bank). The exact functions of these institutions are not particularly important, since evidently the government clearly hoped that any government-supporting organization would help expand the Unified Party. For example, the főispán of Tolna county was pleased to report at the end of November 1922 that the Hangya was growing in his county while

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21 The importance of like-minded organizations in aiding party organization is demonstrated by the assistance the National Union provided to the organization of the Conservative Party in Great Britain. See for example Angelo Panebianco, Political Parties, Organization and Power, Cambridge, 1988, pp.135-138 and Robert Blake, The Conservative Party From Peel to Thatcher, London, 1985, pp.145-152.

22 OLK, 26, 1266, 169.
a physical education committee had been established to influence the population. Both these organizations were helping the party to expand and he called for the government to continue to support them in their activities.23

The ability, however, of such organizations to form the backbone of the party can be questioned. Certainly, as Batkay points out, they could be efficient proponents of propaganda, but this in itself does not mean that they could be easily grafted on to the party apparatus.24 The fact that, for example, the scouts were headed by a prominent Unified Party MP, Pál Teleki, by no means guaranteed that the wider membership would join the party. As for the more openly political groupings, such as the MOVE and ÉME, there were continuing doubts about their value. The főispán of Szabolcs county, for example, wrote that he ‘did not consider them to be without danger’ and he warned that ‘no possibility (as regards their activities) can be ruled out’.25 The főispán of Moson county also wrote of his concerns about such groups. He noted that the recently formed ÉME in his county ‘displays a certain opposition-coloured standpoint’26 Even Bethlen mentioned his concerns about such groups in his 16 September letter. Such worries can only have increased as the clashes between the government and the right-radical opposition intensified through the end of 1922 and 1923.27

Party organization should also have benefited from the government’s willingness to ensure that newspapers publicized and mobilized the party. Bethlen did designate in his 16 September letter as ‘Unified Party newspapers: the Szózat, Nép, Új Barážda, Virradat and those which are very close to their aims, the Budapesti Hírlap and the 8 Órai Újság’; he also called for the support of ‘one notable paper’ in each county.28 The funding of newspapers directly from the prime minister’s office was used extensively during the 1922 election campaign and continued afterwards,

23 OLK, 149, 1922, 10.
25 LK, 28, 448, 6132.
26 OLK, 28, 448, 208.
27 See chapter 4 on declining relations between Bethlen and the right-radicals.
albeit in a somewhat reduced form. On 21 June 1922 Tibor Eckhardt, head of the prime minister’s press office informed all föispâns that those papers that only had value during an election campaign, that supported other conservative parties, or that would financially collapse without government support should no longer be funded. Nevertheless, and contrary to Bethlen’s advice, there is evidence to suggest the föispâns went on funding not just one but a range of papers in each county. In Pest county, the föispán was still funding eleven newspapers in November 1922 to the tune of 110,000 crowns and ten newspapers in August 1924 at a cost of 3,060,000 crowns. The method of funding did however change, with the press office writing on 2 October 1922 that instead of direct cash payments to newspapers, funding should be provided by subsidising twenty-five percent of the cost of the raw paper, the money still being paid through the föispâns.

Nevertheless, the press was not used to publicize and promote the expansion of the party organization, even though the government was aware of the value newspapers could provide. Bethlen described the head of the press office as ‘in the present political circumstances a position of great importance’. The government also, occasionally, urged the föispâns to exert pressure on the newspapers they were funding to follow the government line, for example on the foreign loan negotiations. It does not, however, appear that the same tactic was used to bolster the popularity of the local party. This was not necessarily a fatal mistake but it still meant that an opportunity had been wasted.

Bethlen must also have hoped that the local party branches formed during the election campaign would provide a basis for expanding the party organization. The formation of local election committees had been a part of electioneering since at least the 1870’s. In the 1922 elections, simply to obtain the necessary 10% of voters up to

29 PML, IV 401a, 18, 7.
30 PML, IV 401a, 18/7 and 19/57.
31 PML, IV 401a, 18, 7.
32 OLK, 26, 1271, 6231.
33 PML, IV, 401a, 19/54. See also VML, 401a.
a thousand to endorse the candidate required some form of local organization. As noted above, Bethlen and Gömbös had taken this even further during the election campaign by constituting not only ad hoc election committees, but also creating permanent bodies.

Indeed, a number of főispáns in their responses to Bethlen’s 16 September letter reported that in their counties a branch of the Unified Party was still operating. The főispán of Bács-Bodrog county reported that in one of the four constituencies in his county a party formed at the election was still in existence. The főispán of Abaúj-Torna county reported that, in the most important districts, the party had already been formed in April 1922, and the főispán of Szatmár county reported that election committees ‘were established in every locality of Szatmár county on the occasion of the parliamentary elections’. We also know that branches of the party had been formed during the elections in Borsod county and in Hódmezővásárhely. Indeed, in some counties the party was so well established that the főispáns questioned the urgency of party organization. The főispán of Csongrád county, for example, reported that in Dérekégyháza ‘the party was organized for the elections’ and as ‘governing officials and by means of them the servants are Unified Party supporters, [party] organizing is not urgent’. The főispán of Heves county was so content with the existing party structure that he wrote on 29 October that all that was needed now was a local party-supporting newspaper.

The gap, however, between the election period and Bethlen’s September letter meant that a number of local party organizations lost momentum and effectively ceased operating. In Szabolcs county the főispán reported that although the party had been formed in ‘Nyíregyháza and the [other] constituencies since the elections it has stopped operating’. The főispán of Szatmár county reported that the same had

35 OLK, 28, 448, 141.
36 OLK, 28, 448, 325.
37 OLK, 28, 448, 6.
38 Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, p.39; OLK, 468, B/1, 181.
39 Szinai, Bethlen politikai rendszéréről, p.484.
40 OLK, 26, 1266, 147.
41 OLK, 28, 448, 6132.
occurred in his county and the főispán of Esztergom county also reported that the party structures formed before the election had 'completely weakened'. Hopes of party expansion, therefore, faced two immediate problems. On the one hand much of the momentum generated at the time of the elections had been lost. On the other hand, where a party had been successfully formed, the főispán sometimes (as in Heves county) saw it as proof that there was no need for further organization.

Resistance to Party Expansion

Another problem that Bethlen encountered was a concern that party organization would encroach upon those who had up to this point wielded substantial authority in local politics. In particular, there is evidence to suggest that existing Smallholder organizations, MPs, the lower echelons of the administration, and even the főispánss themselves were deeply concerned about any challenge to their own authority.

The former Smallholder party organization was supposed to have merged into the new Unified Party following the formal unification of the parliamentary parties on 2 February 1922. There is, however, evidence to suggest that in places this had not occurred, probably because there was nothing else to merge with. Some főispáns reported that these remaining independent structures were reluctant to subordinate themselves to the Unified Party. In May 1923, the főispán of Baranya county reported that the old Smallholder Party structures were 'untrustworthy' and could not be used as a base for the party. He wrote that of the 198 localities with Smallholder representatives only ninety could be trusted and went on to complain that they also controlled the party at the county leadership level. His proposed solution was to purge the local party. He wrote, 'I must destroy the untrustworthy leaders or undermine their credibility [so that I can] slowly, district by district, and by co-opting members of the

42 OLK, 28, 448, 88.
intelligentsia, bring to the fore trustworthy elements to transform the party. The főispán of Csongrád county was also unable to replicate the merger in parliament of the Smallholders and Bethlen's supporters. He reported that the local smallholders maintained their independence. His solution in one constituency was to treat them as an equal partner, negotiating with them on how best to expand the party further. The főispán of Borsod county also faced a similar obstacle. He reported in March 1923 that he had still not succeeded in incorporating a government-supporting party in the area into the Unified Party.

Similarly, some MPs also regarded an expanded party as a challenge to their own local authority. Even though Bethlen had made clear in his 16 September letter that he expected MPs to help expand the party, and even though they had been specifically directed two days later by Gömbös to devote their energies to this task, a number of them proved less than willing to help the process move forward. Both in Szeged and in Hódmezővásárhely, the főispáns reported that party MPs, including the former prime minister Teleki and a secretary in the interior ministry, had developed their own private parties. They refused to accept that these should be incorporated into the national party organization. Their positions were obviously strong enough that instead of overriding their complaints, the prime minister's office intervened to order a halt to further organizing in those constituencies. There were also problems with independent government-supporting MPs who regarded the expansion of the Unified Party as an aggressive move. For example, in Tolna county the főispán reported that in two constituencies government-supporting MPs were sufficiently concerned to threaten to stop supporting the government. Once again the prime minister's office gave way and it appears that party organizing in these areas was stopped as a result.

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43 See OLK, 28, 448, 111 and Szinai and Szűcs, Titkos iratai, p.56.
44 OLK, 28, 448, 5.
45 OLK, 28, 448, 317.
46 Budapesti Hírlap, 19 September, 1922.
47 OLK, 28, 448, 54/523.
48 OLK, 28, 448, 650.
Even MPs without their own particular local parties appear to have been unhappy with the encroachment of a centralized party system into their constituencies. A number of MPs relied on their local influence to ensure that they were nominated and elected to parliament. In some cases they had even defeated an official candidate sent down from Budapest to contest the seat. All this gave these MPs the ability to gain government patronage on the basis of their electability and, even if this patronage disappeared, still have a good chance of being elected. This would change, however, if the electorate was organized and controlled by the főispán or party secretary appointed by Budapest. In such a case, the local MP’s own influence, importance and authority would be severely diminished.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, a number of főispáns listed as a major obstacle the failure of the MPs to support the process. For example, the főispán of Baranya county wrote that only one of the eight MPs in the county could be ‘trusted unconditionally’ and even he was ‘very clumsy’, while five other MPs were doing nothing and two were ‘completely untrustworthy’. Such criticisms were echoed by the főispán of Szabolcs county who directly blamed the MPs for impeding party organization, claiming they only wanted their own supporters as party members. The főispán of Fejér county was also critical of the role of the local MPs. He reported on 25 October 1922 that he had repeatedly asked them for help but had received nothing. Bethlen promised to tell them to offer assistance, but the főispán again complained in December that while the MPs were now involved ‘they do not display enough agility’. Then, in March, he reported that due to the MPs being ‘otherwise engaged’ the inaugural committee of the county party had to be postponed, giving the same reason for postponing any organizing during May and June.

49 A later example comes from Dezső Sulyok who won a seat as an independent candidate in the 1936 elections and was then offered membership of the government party and the reimbursement of his campaign expenses. Sulyok, A Magyar tragédia, pp.299-300.
50 OLK, 28, 448, 111.
51 OLK, 28, 448, 4132.
52 OLK, 28, 448, 65.
In the lower echelons of the administration, there also appears to have been little enthusiasm for expanding the party. In this respect, the example of Pest county is illuminating. There, as was routine in all counties, the főispán forwarded Bethlen’s 16 September letter to all the fősölgabírós and mayors in the county along with a request for information on all active organizations in their area and progress reports on the level of party organization. By the end of October, however, eleven fősölgabírós had still not replied and the information that had been supplied to the főispán was brief and generally unconcerned with the matter in hand.\(^{53}\)

One reason for this was indicated by the Duna-Tiszai Mezőgazdasági Kamara, (Danube-Tisza Agricultural Chamber of Commerce). It complained that the local junior officials distrusted new organizations, which they regarded as a threat to political stability and their own authority.\(^{54}\) We can suspect that this is unlikely to have been an isolated example. Both Szinai and Szücs in their 1967 work and Miklós Szinai writing separately in 1971 suggest that the resistance in the lower echelons of the administration to party organization was an important reason for its failure. The idea, they wrote, was ‘entirely foreign to the mentality of the landowning fősölgabírós’.\(^{55}\) The főispán of Szatmár county, however, offered an alternative explanation for the lack of cooperation among the lower levels. He wrote ‘we have entrusted the fősölgabírós and jegyzők with all the matters of organization whereby the matters of organization have become more lumbering, if for no other reason then that they have numerous other things to do’.

There are indications, even among the főispáns, that the question of party expansion did not generate a great deal of enthusiasm. As Nemes notes, they did not send in regular reports and the content of the reports they did send in were extremely variable. For example, the főispáns of Baranya and Fejér counties went into

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\(^{53}\) PML, IV 401a, 17, 25.

\(^{54}\) Ibid.

\(^{55}\) Szinai and Szücs, Titkos iratai, p.36; Szinai, Bethlen politikai rendszéről, pp.483-484.

\(^{56}\) OLK, 28, 448, 6; Szinai and Szücs, Titkos iratai, p.57.
considerable detail on how the party organization was expanding, but the főispán of Sopron county appears to have rarely engaged in correspondence with Bethlen and the prime minister’s office on this matter.\textsuperscript{57} While the lack of co-operation from the lower levels of the administration may have played some part in this, it was ultimately the főispáns who were responsible for motivating their administration and ensuring that the necessary information was passed on to party headquarters.

A number of főispáns sought to blame general apathy and the economic crisis for their lack of progress. The főispán of Fejér county argued that one of the reasons for a slowness in forming the party in his county was that ‘only a certain percentage of the inhabitants of the county are occupied with national politics. Every social group has been gravely affected by inflation, and this so occupies everyone that they are not really concerned with politics’. He also claimed that the voters had never been concerned with parties and instead that ‘the MP is elected more for his recognized personality and popularity than through the liking of his political standpoint’. His conclusion was that ‘the undisciplined and disorganized population never could be gathered into the party organization’.\textsuperscript{58} The főispán of Hódmezővásárhely was also pessimistic about hopes of expanding the party in his area. As early as 30 October 1922, he wrote that any new party could only hope to counterbalance the opposition and seek to guarantee electoral victory, as ‘it is not immediately possible to extend the Unified Party organization to the entire population’.\textsuperscript{59} The főispán of Szabolcs county was also dismissive of any hope of success writing that even in the pre-1914 period, when there were only two parties engaged in a bitter struggle, no party could be created so why should it be possible now?\textsuperscript{60}

Even worse from Bethlen’s perspective, several főispáns actually questioned not only the practicalities but also the very profitability of the whole exercise. The főispán of Borsod county, for example, wrote of his concern that the process was ‘not

\textsuperscript{57} See Nemes, Iratok, ii, pp.102-103 and general correspondence in OLK, 28, 448.
\textsuperscript{58} OLK, 28, 448, 65.
\textsuperscript{59} OLK, 28, 448, 54.
\textsuperscript{60} OLK, 28, 448, 6132. See also Szinai and Szűcs, Titkos iratai, pp.36, 57.
without risk’, although he did not elaborate on the potential problems. The same point
was also made by the főispán of Fejér county in his situation report of 25 October
1922.\textsuperscript{61} The főispán of Baja also wrote of his scepticism over the value of a broad-
based party in his county. He declared that ‘I consider [it] much more important that
the decisive role of the urban Christian intelligentsia is insured’.\textsuperscript{62} The főispán of
Moson county also questioned the value of party expansion. He wrote that ‘as regards
myself I only consider the organizing of party election committees to be necessary’.\textsuperscript{63}
It was, however, the főispán of Szatmár county who launched the strongest attack on
the aims of the whole process. In an annex to his situation report of 2 February 1923,
he attacked the whole idea that party formation was a valuable objective. He argued
that it was actually counter-productive, encouraging the opposition parties to develop
their own organizations. This, in turn, was disturbing the calm which had followed the
election. In his opinion, the exercise would ultimately benefit only the opposition
parties, \textit{[az ellenzéki pártok malmára hajtom a vizet]}\textsuperscript{64}. He also reminded Bethlen that
he had successfully managed the elections up to now and ‘all the elections concluded
according to my desire and I never did any party organizing beforehand’. His
conclusion was, ‘I consider it to be completely sufficient if the party only has election
committees and all that is necessary for these districts is to expand them, \textit{[töljtek
ki]}\textsuperscript{64}.

This is admittedly a rare example of an official writing to the prime minister to
criticize government policy but it is likely that other főispáns held similar views. They
were merely more cautious about expressing them in official correspondence.\textsuperscript{65} It also
demonstrates rather well the old mentality that Bethlen was seeking to challenge.
While he sought to use the party to counter opposition propaganda, some of the
főispáns argued that this would actually provoke the very problem it was seeking to

\textsuperscript{61} OLK, 28, 448, 65/317.
\textsuperscript{62} OLK, 28, 448, 97.
\textsuperscript{63} OLK, 28, 448, 209.
\textsuperscript{64} OLK, 28, 448, 6.
\textsuperscript{65} Szinai and Szücs, Titkos iratai, p.57.
resolve. Their traditional role had always been to preserve calm and stability by minimizing the scope for political debate. They were naturally suspicious of any attempt to politicize the population even when the initiative came from the governing party. What must have been worrying for Bethlen was that the old approach still commanded support among the főispáns, the very individuals who were supposed to be driving the whole process forward.

Another reason for the főispáns' lack of enthusiasm for party expansion may have been that they too were concerned about any encroachment of their personal authority. Their determination to maintain control of the process is revealed by the arguments that emerged over the appointment of party secretaries. Party headquarters, represented by Gömbös, was charged with arranging who should be appointed to this position. The főispáns, however, were distrustful of Budapest's ability to appoint appropriate, that is to say, subservient figures.

As regards the appointment and role of party secretaries, Bethlen had written in his 16 September letter that in creating a party ‘the party secretary serves as an assistant, [segédszerv], to the főispán, that is to say he executes his instructions. According to the rules of the party, in the county office for the party and the főispán a permanent secretary is needed to stand at their disposal in an executive capacity who is well versed in the work of the office to deal with party matters in this area of work, and on the one hand directs the promotional work or press work in accordance with the főispán’s instructions and on the other hand deals with requests handed in from the district with the help of the county or Budapest offices’. 66 Thus not only were the főispáns to expand the party organization, the existing party organization was to expand into the domain of the főispáns: a solution reliant upon cooperation between the party and the administration. Batkay claims that ‘there was little real chance of friction because the existence of a formal governing party did not imply a rigid distinction between politics and administration,’ particularly from 1924 onwards as

66 PML, IV 401a, 17, 25; Nemes, Iratok, ii, p.306
the Smallholders 'left or were driven out' and the bureaucracy joined the party.\textsuperscript{67} As Batkay admits, however, such inter-penetration was by no means as advanced in 1922 and early 1923. Furthermore, even where a főispán was prepared to fully co-operate with the party, he was still likely to object to any potential usurping of his own authority. Unsurprisingly disagreements swiftly emerged.

Only the főispán of Szabolcs county wrote directly of his unhappiness with the whole idea of party secretaries, claiming that it would cause (unspecified) problems. He claimed party secretaries 'would not be anything else than another főispán’s secretary', and demanded that if there was to be such a position he should decide who should fill it.\textsuperscript{68} Most főispáns, however, appeared to support the idea, placing great expectations on a secretary being able to drive forward party expansion. Nevertheless, the determination of the főispáns to have their own candidate, rather than Gömbös’s nominee appointed to the post, is indicated by the almost complete lack of progress on this issue before January 1923. For example, on 25 October the főispán of Fejér county reported that he had found a good candidate for party secretary but was waiting for Gömbös’s authorization. Then, on 21 December, he wrote that he was still waiting for a secretary to be authorized and in early 1923 he reported that there was no decision and ‘this also obstructs the organizing [of the party]’. Similar sentiments were also voiced by the főispáns of Békés, Esztergom, Fejér, Hajdú-Bihar, Nógrád, and Somogy counties.\textsuperscript{69} By the end of 1922, it was only in Veszprém county that the főispán could report that he had succeeded in agreeing with Gömbös on who would be party secretary. Even here, however, there were financial problems. He reported that ‘up to the present day the covering of expenses [for the party secretary] has not been settled in Budapest so that the two month’s payments I was personally authorized by Gömbös to make, I have personally had to provide’. He concluded by

\textsuperscript{67} Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, pp.42-43.
\textsuperscript{68} OLK, 28, 448, 6132.
\textsuperscript{69} OLK, 28, 448, 65/88/111 and Nemes, Iratok, ii, pp.310-311.
asking Bethlen to intervene to ensure that he would receive regular funding from party headquarters.\textsuperscript{70}

What made these disputes even more prolonged was a lack of a clearly defined communication-and-decision-making structure. The need for a single figure who could focus on, control and drive forward the process had already been laid out by the főispán of Szolnok county. He had written to the interior ministry in August with his suggestion that József Somssich should be given the position.\textsuperscript{71} Bethlen however failed to follow through this suggestion. Instead, as we have seen with his 16 September letter, he took personal control of the process. He also, however, delegated responsibility to the főispáns and party headquarters represented by Gőmbös. This arrangement left unclear who was to make the final decision when a dispute arose. Also, no formal channels of communication were put in place to coordinate cooperation between the party, the administration and the government. The főispáns' reports on party organization do not appear to have been passed on to party headquarters and Bethlen seems to have been informed about the problems appointing party secretaries only through the főispáns' reports.\textsuperscript{72}

The unusual nature of this arrangement is demonstrated by the fact that the government usually kept the channels of communication open and consulted widely on policy decisions. For example following a meeting of főispáns on 20 January 1923, their recommendations, such as being kept informed about foreign policy developments and being given a consultative role as regards land reform, were immediately passed onto the other ministries for consideration. The főispáns' suggestions were also raised in cabinet discussions.\textsuperscript{73} Party organization does not, however, appear to have been officially discussed with other ministries, nor was it put

\textsuperscript{70} OLK, 28, 448, 80.
\textsuperscript{71} OLK, 468, B/1, 1323.
\textsuperscript{72} Their of course exists the possibility that informal, and unrecorded, discussions did take place, but this would still have been a poor substitute for the delegation of responsibilities and structured means of resolving disputes that effective decision-making requires.
\textsuperscript{73} OLK, 28, 448, 3/20-21/29/467.
before the cabinet. Furthermore, it was not until 23 January that Bethlen finally raised the issue of the party secretaries with Gömbös, forwarding to him excerpts from the főispáns’ reports which criticized Gömbös’s activities up to this point. This in itself must surely have further damaged relations between Gömbös and the főispáns. The főispáns had either already passed their complaints on to Gömbös, who therefore had no need to be reminded of them, or they had deliberately sought to keep Gömbös ignorant of their complaints by raising the issue only with Bethlen. Either way, Bethlen’s intervention cannot have improved the atmosphere at the subsequent negotiations which Gömbös was required to conduct with the főispáns.

Limits on Party Expansion

Szinai and Szűcs claim that ‘especially as regards organization [Gömbös] at the absolute beginning, very cautiously, only wanted to establish party committees’. Certainly Bethlen felt it necessary to remind him of the need for party expansion in his January letter. Nevertheless, following Bethlen’s intervention, Gömbös, in contrast to Szinai and Szűcs’s assertion, seems to have redoubled his efforts to ensure that the party secretaries were appointed and the whole process could move forward. Only six days after receiving Bethlen’s letter, he replied that he had finally held what he admitted was his first ‘conference on party organization’ with the party-director and eight főispáns at party headquarters. Szinai suggests that the főispáns’ meetings of January 1923 also put pressure on Gömbös, although in the report of the meeting sent to Bethlen there was no mention of the issue of party organization. Bethlen did, however, write after the meeting to all his ministers on 18 February 1923, reminding

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74 It is a fair assumption that unrecorded discussions did take place on this question but there remained a need for formal consultations, if only to provide authority for the decisions which were then made.
75 OLK, 28, 448, 111; Nemes, Iratok, ii, pp.310-311.
76 Szinai and Szűcs, Titkos iratai, p.36; OLK, 28, 448, 111. It is also worth noting that Gömbös when he became prime minister did embark on a substantial expansion of the party organization indicating that he was not opposed to the principle of the modern party formation.
77 OLK, 28, 448, 111.
78 Szinai, Bethlen politikai rendszéről, p.484; OLK, 28, 448, 3.
them of the főispáns ‘increasing importance’. Bethlen was thus moving to strengthen
their position in the governing apparatus and in his January 1923 letter to Gömbös, he
was clearly reflecting their side of the story as regards the party secretary question. 79

The meeting of Gömbös and the főispáns did not decide to appoint one
secretary per county, as originally proposed by Bethlen; instead seven were appointed
for the eight counties represented. Győr was given two secretaries while Esztergom
and Komárom had one to share. There were also different wages and apparently
different responsibilities for the secretaries. For example, the secretary for Baranya
county was to receive 20,000 crowns a month for ‘an office’ while the secretary for
Győr was to receive 5,000 crowns as ‘a wage’. It is probable that these were not full
time posts since the appointees already had jobs; the secretary for Fejér county being
a lawyer and the secretary for Somogy county being a newspaper editor. 80 Gömbös
concluded his report on the meeting with a request for 425,000 crowns to meet the
secretaries’ wages for the next three months, to be sent to the director of the party. 81
On 22 February 1923, he again wrote to Bethlen reporting that since his previous
letter he had held a further three meetings with groups of főispáns and, with two
exceptions, had come to agreement on who would be party secretary. 82 The total cost
however for just three months wages for all the party secretaries appointed had risen
to 2,228,000 crowns. Even this amount was, however, insufficient to fund the
secretaries’ activities. Gömbös was again forced to write to Bethlen on 28 April,
reporting that the főispáns had already spent all the money allocated to them and were
in need of further financial assistance. 83

Szinai implies that this exchange of letters between Bethlen and Gömbös
marked the end of the organizing process. 84 Nevertheless, Gömbös was now
demonstrating a degree of optimism that the process was finally moving forward.

79 OLK, 28, 448, 13.
80 OLK, 28, 448, 111.
81 OLK, 28, 448, 111. See also Szinai, Bethlen politikai rendszéréről, p.484.
82 It is unclear why two counties remained without party secretaries and the főispán of Abaúj-Torna
county was still writing of the need for a party secretary in March 1923 see OLK, 28, 448, 325.
83 OLK, 28, 448, 111.
84 Szinai, Bethlen politikai rendszéréről, p.484.
While admitting that ‘it is not a matter of [the party being] completely developed [with] a register kept of every party member. The task is primarily to establish the party branches, [pártkeretek]’, Gőmbös was confident that in four months at the latest ‘such a foundation will be established where the party’s county administrations will cover material and personal costs’. In other words the local branches would have sufficient numbers of members to be able to fund their own work - a real development from their previous role as merely election committees. Furthermore, although as noted above a number of the főispáns’ reports were sceptical of the ideas behind, and possibilities for, party expansion, their complaints about the lack of party secretaries at least indicated a willingness to get on with the job. This suggests that there was genuine confidence that real progress could be made when the party secretaries were finally appointed.

Even before the question of the secretaries had been resolved, some progress was already being reported. On 28 November 1922, the főispán of Baja reported that organization was continuing among all social classes and he was confident that the party would be formed by January. The főispán of Hódmezővásárhely reported that he had effectively created a party branch in all but name and had even drawn up the party membership document by October 1922. The főispán of Borsod county also reported that as early as October 1922 he had established a county party, although he had not succeeded in forming a local branch in any of the constituencies in his county. The főispán of Veszprém county was also able to report that the county party had been formed on 22 October 1922. He added that he was confident that within half a year branches of the party would be established in all seven electoral constituencies in the county.

When the secretaries were finally appointed, the process acquired further momentum. The főispán of Tolna had initially reported in October 1922 that he was

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85 OLK, 28, 448, 111. See also Szinai, Bethlen politikai rendszéről, p.484.
86 OLK, 28, 448, 97.
87 OLK, 28, 448, 54.
88 OLK, 28, 448, 317.
89 OLK, 28, 448, 80.
having serious difficulties and would postpone party organizing over the winter months. In a report dated May 1923 the főispán declared, however, that party organizing was going well with four of the seven constituencies in his county having formed a local party complete with president, deputy president, secretary and committee. He also reported his plans for a county party to be founded at the end of June. The situation in Fejér county also improved. While from October to January 1923, the főispán had been unable to report any progress, (blaming the economic situation, general popular sentiment in the county, the unhelpfulness of the local MPs, and the lack of a party secretary), on 1 March 1923 he reported that the founding meeting for the county party was planned for two weeks time. Although this was delayed because the MPs were occupied with other matters, a meeting was finally held on 30 April, which the főispán reported proceeded 'with the great interest of the audience'. Organizing was then again delayed by the MPs' inability to help mobilize the population. Still on June 19 1923 he was able to write that, although there was no president for the county party, a party committee had been formed and had worked out the details of the party structure. His confidence was now so high that he even declared that he was planning to expand the party organization into those areas where the 'party programme is adversely received'.

In Veszprém county the főispán was also making progress, reporting on 30 April 1923 that although much work was still to be done he had nevertheless succeeded in forming a branch of the party in Várpalota. By 24 May he was able to report that in all seven constituencies in his county there was now a functioning party organization. The főispán of Bács-Bodrog county was also able to report some progress with the creation of a party branch in one constituency, while another had had a functioning local party since the elections. This left only two constituencies in his county without any form of party organization. The főispán of Baranya could

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90 OLK, 28, 448, 290.
91 OLK, 28, 448, 111.
92 OLK, 28, 448, 65.
93 OLK, 28, 448, 88/111.
94 OLK, 28, 448, 141.
also report that progress was being made. In an extremely detailed report dated, 14 May 1923, he reported that he had succeeded in finding trusted individuals in 197 of the 317 localities in his county. The föispán of Győr county was still unable to report any concrete developments in his county but he did at least announce that, following the appointment of the party secretary, organizing was under way.

Indeed, although the momentum substantially diminished from the summer of 1923 onwards, new branches of the party continued to be formed. In September 1923 it was reported that the Tolna county branch was ready to begin functioning and on 14 October the party branch in Szolnok county was officially opened by a delegation of government ministers. There was even a report of a local branch being opened in 1925. The party had thus expanded to the point where it was operating in every county, at least in some of its constituencies. There was, therefore, by the summer of 1923, sufficient numbers of local party branches in operation to suggest that the basis for a broad-based, modern party had been created. When, however, we look for signs that a modern party was beginning to function the impression emerges that no real structure was actually in place.

The Party and its Alternatives in the Bethlen Government

There was an occasional indication that the party was exerting some influence on the government. On one occasion, party headquarters provided Bethlen with information on a föispán’s bad relationship with the culture minister Klebelsberg. In another case Bethlen forwarded to the finance, public welfare and army ministers information on a petition which had been passed to him by party headquarters. This had been signed by a large number of ‘party members’ in Szécsény and urged government support for their locality. Bethlen suggested that a new army barracks

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95 OLK, 28, 448, 111.
96 OLK, 28, 448, 111.
97 Budapesti Hírlap, 18 September and 16 October, 1923.
98 Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, p.40.
99 OLK, 468, B/1, 1164.
should be built there, which the finance minister authorized and the minister for public welfare reported that eighty million crowns’ worth of credit had been allocated for housing construction in the district.\textsuperscript{100}

The party also occasionally recommended individuals to Bethlen as candidates for important administrative positions, although the general historical consensus is that this normally worked the other way round with more and more officials becoming party members.\textsuperscript{101} Furthermore, local party branches were occasionally represented at ceremonial event and Bethlen was sometimes greeted on a visit to a provincial town by party representatives. There are also examples of party delegations visiting Budapest to present an honour to Bethlen which their locality had conferred upon him.\textsuperscript{102}

These examples suggest that the party importance was to some extent recognized, and it was able to exert a degree of influence upon the government. It should, however, be noted that these cases appear to have been exceptional - a sign of how the party could function rather than how things normally occurred.

Instead, the government appears to have supported the interests of particular individuals irrespective of whether they were party members or not. Social contacts played at least as important a role as the occasional example of the local party obtaining government intervention and exerting political influence. An indication of this is provided by Bethlen’s occasional intervention in the land reform process which was being conducted under the leadership of his old ally, Janos Tóth.\textsuperscript{103} Altogether Bethlen intervened in thirteen land reform cases in 1923 and four cases in 1924.\textsuperscript{104} For example, on 5 April 1923 he wrote to Tóth to ask for the case of Count László Szapáry, ‘who has done us a great deal of service’, to be reopened. Three days later he again wrote in the interests of Manfred Weiss, a wealthy industrialist. Then on 25

\textsuperscript{100} OLK, 468, B/16, 41/48/50.
\textsuperscript{101} OLK, 468, B/1, 1249/1259/1314. See also Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, pp.47-53 and Macartney, October 15\textsuperscript{th}, i, pp.46-47.
\textsuperscript{102} See for example Budapesti Hírlap, 13 May and 19 June, 1924.
\textsuperscript{103} Tóth was certainly a close political supporter of Bethlen having been one of those present at the founding of the short-lived political party Bethlen had established in 1919.
\textsuperscript{104} OLK, 468, B/1 and B/16.
May he wrote to both Tóth and Nagyatádi-Szabó, the agriculture minister, asking them to reconsider the case of Count Albert Nemes who had performed 'excellent diplomatic work' for the government. It is worth noting that in all such cases no mention was made of whether the individual concerned was, or was not, a party member.105

Such occasional and informal contacts as did exist between the party organization and the government could not realistically sustain a functioning party network. To motivate individuals to join a party requires granting them some form of patronage. Yet as Batkay points out, even in the appointment of leading party officials filling, let alone in determining government policy, it was the government not the party organization that made all the decisions.106 Even the idea, mentioned by Bethlen in his 16 September letter, of a national party conference was quietly shelved. Instead the local party branches were shut out of the decision making process. As the inability of some local branches to continue operating after the 1922 elections had already demonstrated, the creation of a local party structure was no guarantee that it would continue to function. Local party branches required more than just Bethlen's idea of monthly or fortnightly meetings, which were themselves little more than propaganda exercises, to be encouraged to continue organizing.

Bethlen did however have good reasons for sidelining the party structure. If the party formulated and expressed policies and interests, this would have undermined Bethlen's efforts to appear to be the head of a truly national government representing the interests of all Hungarian citizens. Much more appropriate to that ideal was the use, not of the party network, but of apparently non-party or cross-party groups to express popular support for government policies. Indeed, this method was used even at the height of the drive to expand the party organization.

One useful tactic was for delegations to present to the government appeals on behalf of the electors of a particular locality. On 24 June 1922, for example, a

105 OLK, 468, B/1, 331 and B/16, 18/19; Szinai and Szücs, Titkos iratai, p.129.
106 Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, p.37.
delegation from Debrecen, claiming to represent the electorate of that city, demanded the reintroduction of the open ballot. This fitted in nicely with the fact that the opposition had won the election in Debrecen. It also could be used to challenge opposition claims that Bethlen had disregarded the will of the electorate when he restored the open ballot. Often, when an issue was particularly sensitive, such delegations would be chaperoned by senior officials and ministers. For example, on 6 December, in the middle of continuing arguments over the need for further land reform, several delegations of agricultural workers visited the agricultural minister. These were led by such figures as Gömbös, who duly reported that these delegations were ‘satisfied’ with the answers they had received to their unrecorded questions.

The way in which such delegations were expected to reinforce government policies, not challenge them, is demonstrated by an example from Vas county. On 20 December 1922, a delegation led by the főispán visited the finance minister to call for economic reforms. The government response was particularly swift. Only days later it was announced that this particular főispán was to be replaced.

The government also used the local county assemblies, [törvényhatoságok]. These had only two-fifths of their members elected and were chaired by the főispán or his deputy. This was normally sufficient to ensure compliance with the administration’s and thus the government’s intentions. Nevertheless, these assemblies professed themselves to be representative of local feeling. They could, therefore, be used to demonstrate that there was support for a particular government policy that extended beyond party affiliations. For example, at the peak of Bethlen’s difficulties with the right-radicals in the spring of 1923, a series of local county and city assemblies meeting in such diverse locations as Baranya, Bihar, Budapest,

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107 Budapesti Hírlap, 25 June, 1922.
108 Budapesti Hírlap, 7 December, 1922. These delegations arrived rather frequently. For example, in January 1923 delegations from Piliscsaba, Kiskunfélegyháza, the National Association of Teachers (Tanítók Országos Szövetsége), Pest county civil servants and Zemplen county visited the various ministries. See Budapesti Hírlap, 10, 18, 20, 24 January, 1923.
109 Budapesti Hírlap, 20, 28 December, 1922.
Debrecen, Miskolc, Nógrád, Pécs, Pest and Zemplén, expressed their confidence in Bethlen, his ministers, and the policies of the government.\textsuperscript{111}

These local assemblies were quite prepared to intervene in support of the government on specific political issues. For example, during the clashes between the interior minister and the Smallholders over administrative reform, Bihar, Győr, Somogy, Tolna, Veszprém (twice), and Zemplén counties forwarded their local resolutions to the government. These called for a two-chamber parliament, the preservation of the ‘bureaucracy which stands on the basis of old constitutional law’, and expressed their full confidence in the interior minister. The similarity of all these declarations, and the fact that they were then passed onto the government, suggests that this was at least in part a centrally directed campaign to build up the interior minister’s position.\textsuperscript{112} Again, during the arguments over the need for a foreign loan in early 1924, a number of county and city assemblies intervened specifically to support the government’s handling of financial policy.\textsuperscript{113}

Another reason why the government may have wished to bypass party structures was that there were doubts about their reliability. Throughout the 1922-1923 period, tensions had been growing between the government and the right-radicals. The eventual break between the two ideologies in August 1923 ensured that one component in the party’s development, the right-radical organizations such as the MOVE and ÉME were now suspected of operating against the government.\textsuperscript{114} Indeed, Gömbös, who led the right-radicals into opposition, had himself played a key role in developing the party. For example, he had helped appoint the party secretaries who had done so much work to expand the party. Even though he was sacked in June from his party leadership position, both he and his supporters were likely to retain an influence in the party even after they had formally broken from it. Politicians are

\textsuperscript{111} Budapesti Hírlap, 18 May and 14 June, 1923 and Szózat, 10 April, 13 June, 1 July, 1923.
\textsuperscript{112} OLK, 26, 1314, 189. Other county assemblies confined their support for the government on this question to public declarations of confidence in Bethlen and the interior minister see for example Pest county’s declaration in Budapesti Hírlap, 10 January, 1923.
\textsuperscript{113} Budapesti Hírlap, 17 April, 1924.
\textsuperscript{114} The government cracked down sharply on right-radical organizations such as the ÉME following the split with Gömbös. See Chapter 4.
always reluctant to devolve power and influence to any other political body. Bethlen must have been doubly so when he considered how much easier it was to influence the parliamentary caucus than to sway a network of local party branches - particularly as many of these branches had been partly established by Gömbös who was now an opposition leader.

Reasons for Excluding the Party from Government

Tactically, after the party crisis of 1923, it made more sense to minimize the party’s role. Indeed Batkay is on the right lines when he concludes that tactical considerations lay behind Bethlen’s plans to expand the party organization. He misses the point, however, by focusing on the benefits Bethlen accrued from particular cases of party formation.⑩ Bethlen’s instructions on party formation were too general, and the scale of the project too wide, for every single case to have been concerned with a specific political event. Rather, the entire process should be seen as a ‘tactic’, an exercise in responding to a perceived danger. When that danger subsided and the exercise itself became dangerous there was little incentive for it to be continued.

Two examples demonstrate just how little enthusiasm remained after Gömbös’s resignation for continuing the work of party organization. Financial difficulties could have been avoided, bearing in mind the sums the government had at its disposal. There were certainly no scruples about providing some government revenues for temporarily paying the party secretaries. Substantial sums were not, however, put at the party’s disposal. The only money that appears to have been spent on party organization was the luxurious refurbishment of the party headquarters, reopened complete with its own private restaurant on 21 November 1922.⑪ Bethlen’s unwillingness to support the local party structure with all the resources at his disposal thus raises questions about his determination by mid-1923 to continue the process of

⑩ Batkay, Authoritarian Politics, p.40.
⑪ Budapesti Hirlap, 22 November, 1922.
party organization. Also revealing were the celebrations to mark Gömbös's successor, László Almassy's first year as executive vice-president in July 1924. In his speech of thanks to the party he made no mention of his duty or efforts to expand the party. Instead he appeared to focus entirely on the state of the parliamentary party, claiming it was 'so unified that the post of executive vice president is not even necessary'. He was persuaded not to abolish his post but this was not because of a need to redouble his efforts to expand the party organization. Rather he was merely urged to continue 'directing the matters of the club'.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can state that Bethlen's failure to expand the Unified Party organization was not due to the relative popularity or unpopularity of the party.

There were, instead, a number of other reasons for Bethlen's failure. He failed to fully exploit the powers available to him such as the press to drive the process forward. He encountered resistance from vested interests, suspicious of change and opposed to any encroachment of their own authority. The process lacked a clear chain of command, and clearly defined means by which party headquarters, local party branches, and the administration could ensure problems and conflicts of interest were swiftly resolved.

The primary reason, however, for Bethlen's failure to expand the party organization was that he saw the whole question in terms of a political tactic rather than recognizing the benefits that could be accrued by having of a modern, broad-based party.

In the 1930's the then prime minister Gömbös, declared his intention to expand the party by creating 'sections for propaganda, social work, women, popular education and economic mobilization with cells in each of Hungary's four-thousand-

117 Budapesti Hirlap, 2 July, 1924.
odd incorporated communes'. No such aspiration was expressed by Bethlen, who laid out his plans for party formation in a few paragraphs of a much longer letter on propaganda and national security. This suggests that he regarded party expansion as a part of a wider process rather than a desirable goal in its own right. This is not simply a question of semantics. Bethlen's conception of the party was still as a means to an end: if that end, the neutralization of the MSZDP, could be arrived at by other means then the value of an expanded party diminished and the whole process of party expansion could be sidelined. The attempt in 1922-1923 to expand the party organization, lost urgency when the danger it was responding to itself diminished.

By the end of 1923 the situation was increasingly stable. The MSZDP was increasingly isolated, divided and confined primarily to its urban strongholds with little influence on the countryside. The need for a highly politicized environment seemed therefore less and less pressing. Also the right-radicals, such as Gömbös, had exerted an influence on the party's development, increasing the likelihood that Bethlen would regard the party organization as a potential threat to the government if it was granted genuine political influence. Furthermore, by sidelining the party structure Bethlen was also able to appear to be representing the nation rather than his own political party.

It seems, therefore, that while tactical considerations persuaded Bethlen to begin the process of expanding the party organization, tactical considerations also persuaded Bethlen to effectively bring the process to a halt by the end of 1923. Once again Bethlen had demonstrated his ability to change his tactics, to adjust to a changing political situation.

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Chapter 6 – Bethlen and the MSZDP, 1922-1925

Introduction

As we saw in chapter two, in December 1921 Bethlen had signed an agreement with the MSZDP which was supposed to usher in a new, and more constructive, relationship between the two sides. By December 1924, however, the party had chosen once again to engage in a disastrous parliamentary boycott, which in turn collapsed in May 1925 without achieving any gains. This further undermined the party’s popularity even with its core voters, and confirmed that it was an increasingly marginalized force on the very edge of the political arena. The purpose of this chapter is to consider how this occurred and the role Bethlen played.

It will demonstrate that in spite of the signing of the agreement hostility on both sides continued unabated in the run up to, and during, the election campaign. In the next part of the chapter the vicious circle of socialist criticism, government reaction, and increasing disillusion within the MSZDP will be laid out. The chapter will proceed to argue that this vicious circle resulted in the MSZDP’s decision to attack the foreign loan, and, in December 1924, to enter into a parliamentary boycott. After critically examining the boycott, the failure of the opposition to achieve any kind of concession, and the socialists’ descent into internecine strife, the chapter will conclude with a consideration of the overall factors that led the MSZDP to adopt such a disastrous policy.

Continuing Hostility to the Government

As argued in chapter two, the December agreement was always likely to lead to bitter recriminations, as both sides revealed their reluctance to fully implement their concessions. Almost immediately after negotiations were concluded the MSZDP began to attack the government for failing to implement a substantial
programme of reform. The MSZDP did at least decide to end its two-year parliamentary boycott and contest the elections. Entirely absent, however, from the reasons given for this decision were any suggestions that the government had itself changed sufficiently to warrant some form of improved relationship. Instead this change in the party’s tactics was justified by ‘a need to exploit the favourable situation’ by using the ‘parliamentary way’ to ‘break’ and ‘transform’ the regime’s power. The idea that the regime itself might be changing voluntarily did not feature in discussions.

Such reasoning was entirely consistent with the theoretical underpinning of Hungarian socialism. Prior to 1918 both the Hungarian and Austrian socialist parties had failed to come down firmly in favour of either revolutionary or parliamentary methods for achieving reform. This ambivalence was influenced by the leading Austrian ideologue, Victor Adler’s claim that there was no need to choose between the two options. Indeed the first MSZDP congress of 1880 had declared that ‘all means leading to the goal’ should be used and described the parliamentary struggle as only ‘one of the important instruments of agitation and organization’. Again the 1903 declaration, which remained the ideological platform of the MSZDP throughout the 1920s, demanded ‘the utilization of all means which conform with the sense of justice of the proletariat’. The party, therefore, had long regarded parliamentary participation as merely a means to an end, and the December agreement had done nothing to alter this view. The MSZDP had become more moderate throughout 1920 and 1921 but it had not become a party committed to the parliamentary process. The

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1 See Chapter 2, footnotes 141-143.
3 Melanie Sully, Continuity and Change in Austrian Socialism, New York, 1982, p.17. See also the whole of the chapter, ‘Social Democracy Under the Empire’, pp.11-33 for a wider consideration of influential Austrian socialist views on the merits of the parliamentary struggle.
party leadership justified, and continued to justify, participation in the elections solely as a means of obtaining results.

The party's election manifesto provided a further indication that it had not taken on board either the letter or the spirit of the December agreement. To take just one example, the MSZDP had specifically accepted in the agreement the requirement that 'relations with the emigration must be severed'. Nevertheless, one demand of the party's manifesto, repeated throughout the election campaign, was that the government should permit the return of the émigrés from exile. There was even talk of nominating several émigrés, such as Ernő Garami, to stand as MSZDP candidates.⁵

At the same time that the MSZDP was demonstrating a wilful disregard for the provisions of the December agreement it too was being infuriated by the way the government was conducting the elections. While it can be argued (see chapter three) that the elections should not be dismissed as simply an exercise in electoral corruption and restricting the franchise, Bethlen certainly made sure his party had the upper hand. The socialists were on the receiving end of various abuses, restrictions and chicanery. They were thus able to see the whole affair as another manifestation of the government's willingness to abuse its power and reject reform. The MSZDP had for the first time secured parliamentary representation and became the largest opposition party with twenty-four of the 245 seats, but its opening declaration to the parliament was unable to applaud this momentous development. It did rejoice that 'after a thousand years of political existence of the Hungarian state, the representatives of the working classes appear [for] the first time in the legislature of the Hungarian nation on the same footing with other social classes'. It then went on, however, to deny that the parliament had any legitimacy because the elections had not been entirely democratic.⁶

⁶ PTSA, 658.3, 47. (Lajos Serfőző was the first historian to comprehensively examine this fond. For all further references to PTSA, 658.3, 47 see also Serfőző, A MSZDP).
The party’s newly elected MPs also found other ways of demonstrating their contempt for the legitimacy of this parliament. They boycotted the opening celebrations of the parliament, refused to stand for the oath, and wore red flowers in their lapels at their first seating earning them for years afterwards the name ‘vörös szegfűk’ (red carnations). Further evidence that the MSZDP was still embittered by past events was the first decision of the parliamentary party’s earliest meeting on 20 June 1922. It decided to go to Kerepesi cemetery to honour the graves of two party journalists who had been killed in 1919 during the ‘white terror’, an issue which infuriated the government whenever it was raised. The MSZDP was also not prepared to let the government’s conduct of the elections be forgotten. Peyer used his first speech in parliament to protest about the way he had been treated by the authorities during the election campaign.

Overall, despite the December agreement, the party’s decision to participate in the elections and the electoral success it had achieved, its hostility to the Bethlen government remained as virulent as ever. Its presence in the parliament should be seen only as evidence of a belief that this was now the best way to secure real reforms. Such a pragmatic position could however only be justified by one outcome, the achievement of real reform. When, over the next few years, no such reforms were forthcoming, advocates of this course of action found themselves in an increasingly indefensible position.

Continuing Hostility to the MSZDP

Within the government there was also growing concern about the conduct of the MSZDP. The socialists were suspected of using political strikes, something that had been expressly forbidden under the terms of the agreement. General Pál Nagy warned as early as January 1922 that the socialists were expanding their organization

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7 Budapesti Hirlap, 20 June, 1922 and PTSA 658.3 47, 1.
8 PTSA 658.3 47,11; Nagy, Bethlen liberalis ellenzéke, p.87.
in preparation for more strikes, particularly in the coal mining districts. The
government was committed by the December agreement to abolishing the wartime
‘exceptional powers’ that remained in force.\(^{10}\) Nagy, however, argued that the
authorities actually needed even more powers to deal with the increasing danger
posed by socialist agitation. The head of the state railways also echoed these fears. He
claimed that the MSZDP controlled the unions and were therefore directly responsible
for any strike action. He even claimed that their activities could lead to terrorism.\(^{11}\)
Even the moderate trade secretary Lajos Hegyeshalmy warned in March that more
strikes were on their way and coal would have to be conserved.\(^{12}\) At a cabinet
meeting on 7 April 1922 the army minister again raised the strike issue. He reported
that more strikes were now imminent and a large part of the workforce was preparing
for a general strike. He concluded that although internment was due to expire in July,
the strike danger and ‘the ensuring of other military interests’ required that it continue
to be maintained.\(^{13}\)

Indeed it was the army ministry that throughout the first half of 1922 remained
the most vocal opponent of any reformist course the government might be
considering. In a series of reports it repeatedly warned of the danger posed by the
MSZDP. In February the army ministry reported that the MSZDP was involved in
strikes and inaccurately lamented that ‘already there is no censorship’. In March it
warned that communists were ‘possibly in every business and workplace’ and warned
of the links between Zionism and socialism; both it claimed were equally anti-
national. The ministry also insisted that socialist hatred of the government had
reached such a point that they would even vote for the conservative opposition, if that
was the best chance of defeating the government party’s candidate. In June, another
official at the army ministry, accused the MSZDP of ‘striving for the weakening of

\(^{10}\) For a further discussion of the extent of these ‘exceptional powers’ see Szinai and Szűcs, Titkos
íratai, pp.38-41 and Miklós Szinai, ‘A parlamenten kívüli kormányzás Austriában és Magyarországon
\(^{11}\) OLK, 468, B/1, 25.
\(^{12}\) Szinai and Szűcs, Titkos íratai, pp.99-100.
\(^{13}\) OLK, 27, Mt, jkv, 7 April, 1922.
the present political system and the intensification of destruction’. He also reported that Jews and the Jewish press were working for the socialists and claimed that over the last month their power had increased yet further, adding that one of their aims was ‘world revolution’.14

Critics of the MSZDP also used the results of the 1922 elections to bolster their arguments. Kozma warned in his report on the election results that the MSZDP would now be led by the emigration.15 Unified Party MPs publicly, (and the prime minister’s social-political department privately), raised concerns about the predominance of communists among MSZDP MPs.16 The 1976 official history of Hungary also argues that the unexpected success of the MSZDP in the elections provided a further incentive for a government clamp-down to prevent them increasing their popularity.17

There were still moderate voices within the government. A report on ‘Hungarian wage movements’ in the first half of 1922 argued that the roots of wage agitation lay in economic difficulties, and that even without socialist agitation there would still be industrial unrest.18 Indeed the defence ministry’s June 1922 report conceded that the strength of the MSZDP stemmed not only from intimidation and terror, but also from economic difficulties and the slow pace of the land reform.19

This view was, however, no longer shared by one of Bethlen’s key advisers, Zoltán Bencs, head of the social-political department of the prime minister’s office. Throughout 1921, Bencs had been an advocate of negotiations with the MSZDP. From July 1922 onwards, however, a marked change in his view of the MSZDP is apparent. His July situation report warned that anti-state, communist agitation was growing and claimed that this was benefiting the socialists, ‘who are expanding [and]

14 OLK, 26, 1266 4, 3-27, 30-44, 46-55.
15 Nemes, Iratok, ii, pp.298-300.
16 Szözat, 27 June, 1922. A leading Unified Party MP, Imre Örffy, claimed that of the twenty-four MSZDP MPs, twelve were former communists while the social political department reported that seventeen had been prosecuted for communist offences. See OLK, 808, 34.
17 Magyarország története, ii, p.459.
18 OLK, 429, 12.
19 OLK, 26, 1266, 4, 46-55.
already have designs upon every layer of society'. He also warned that some of the party’s MPs were using their parliamentary immunity from prosecution to show that their final goal was communism and he listed five names including that of the leader of the parliamentary party of the MSZDP Gyula Peidl. He also warned of intense communist agitation in several localities, reporting that the atmosphere was similar to the one existing before the 1918 revolution. Then, in his August report, he reported that strikes were indeed being instigated and ‘with similar aggression the organs of social democracy endeavour to prepare the way for communism’.20

Kozma also focused on the strike issue as an example of why the MSZDP could not be trusted. He wrote at the end of August 1922, ‘on the one hand, the Social Democratic Party negotiated with the government and in its first parliamentary declaration announced loyal cooperation in the economic field. On the other hand, it leads the workers from one strike to another’. Particularly revealing for Kozma was that two days after Bethlen had warned Peyer that he would take all necessary measures to break a miners’ strike, it stopped and did not reoccur.21 He also pointed out in another report in July that, in the first half of the year, 645, 159 working days had been lost to strikes, strong evidence that the MSZDP’s political strikes were doing real damage to the whole economy.22

To what extent the MSZDP was influencing the strike action remains unclear. One Marxist historian has concluded that ‘the strikes in reality continued for economic aims’. Nevertheless he admits that elements of the party were stirring them up and the party leadership ‘could not, and in part did not want to, prevent particular strikes’.23 Furthermore the MSZDP could not distance itself from the actions of the unions when its very legitimacy and authority stemmed, in part, from being the political representative of those same unions. Furthermore, as another Marxist historian puts it, strikes had long been used by the party as a ‘useful means of

20 OLK, 808, 72, Situation Reports, July and August 1922.
21 Nemes, Iratok, ii, p.370.
22 Ibid., pp.507-511.
23 Serfözö, A MSZDP, p.110.
convincing the workers of the necessity to organize.\textsuperscript{24} In any case, the key point is that the MSZDP was perceived to be culpable and acting in contravention of the December 1921 agreement.

Bethlen’s key advisers such as Bencs and Kozma, had throughout 1921 argued that negotiated reforms were in the government’s and the nation’s interest. They now joined with the army ministry in arguing that the MSZDP was a growing danger and that a crackdown was needed. This was a key development for it meant that there was no one in the government prepared to continue arguing for a reformist agenda. The increasingly hard-line views of Bethlen’s advisers were always likely to be translated into increasingly hard-line policies directed against the MSZDP.

The First Weeks of the Parliament

Nevertheless, the first weeks of the new parliament witnessed a degree of superficial cordiality between the two sides. On 21 June, Peyer was invited by the finance minister to discuss the finance bill. The party also held discussions with the government on trade union questions and the possibility of a further amnesty. There was even some optimistic talk in the MSZDP that a replacement for Horthy could be agreed to. Publicly, the MSZDP was also making the right noises. It declared that it wanted to help the revision of the Trianon peace treaty. Peyer added, ‘we will not in any way obstruct the government’s work which seeks to ensure the rule of law in this country’ and other party MPs made similar speeches. The atmosphere appeared so cordial that Peidl was actually invited for tea at Bethlen’s office.\textsuperscript{25}

Beneath the surface, however, worries within the government about socialist agitation were having an effect. The emergency powers were due to expire on 26 July, and Bethlen in the December agreement and elsewhere had promised their repeal. However, not only did Bethlen not repeal the emergency powers but he also

\textsuperscript{24} Vincze, The Struggle for the First Independent Proletarian Party, p.42.
\textsuperscript{25} PTSA, 658.3, 47, pp. 12, 14, 59, 64, 76.
demanded that further steps be taken to crack down on any sign of dissent. On 24
June, he wrote to his interior minister Rakovszky, warning him that the socialists were
continuing to agitate in the countryside with secret house-to-house meetings.26

Rakovszky's response was swift. On 3 July he sent a circular to all police
chiefs and alispáns repeating Bethlen's warning about socialist agitation in the
countryside. He used the term 'anti-national', [nemzetietlen], to describe socialist
organizations, and claimed that they involved foreign communists who aimed to
destroy national unity and social order. He warned that political strikes should not be
treated as wage disputes and demanded that the strictest procedures, including
internment, should be employed, although he also wrote that those previously released
should not be re-interned. He also demanded that special attention should be given to
those displaying not only communist symbols and slogans but also any five-pointed
stars, and even red buttons and ribbons. Political meetings were only to be allowed if
they did not constitute a threat to social order. Meetings organized by MPs, which
were not 'obviously' dangerous, could still go ahead as long as they were closely
supervised. He added that the MSZDP should not be allowed to organize in the
countryside.27

The comments on buttons and ribbons seem to be a sign of almost impractical
paranoia, while the rest of the decree was couched in language vague enough to give
the local authorities a great deal of freedom in how they interpreted such terms as
'dangerous' and 'anti-national'. While the whole decree was clearly repressive in
sentiment, it is still noticeable that different standards were being set for socialist
groups with and without parliamentary representation - the MSZDP and the
communist party. Overall, however, the tone of the decree reflected a real hardening
of the government's position as regards the MSZDP. This could not even be justified
by a need to offset the repeal of the emergency powers, which had been prolonged for
another six months.

26 OLK, 468, B/1, 862.
27 PML, IV, 401a, 17, 13 and OLK. 468, B/1, 862; Nemes, Iratok, ii, pp.163-165.
The relationship between the government and the MSZDP was growing steadily worse. Government party MPs accused the MSZDP of cooperating with the Romanians during their march on Budapest. Bethlen also squashed any hopes of a new détente by rejecting the key socialist demands of the return of the émigrés, and the end of internment and the exceptional powers. Relations soured further as the socialists chose to turn down the government’s offer to join a delegation of the Interparliamentary Union on a visit to Vienna. The legitimacy it would have bestowed on the MSZDP, recognized by a conservative government as a representative party of Hungary, seemed insufficient reward for bestowing the same legitimacy on Bethlen’s governing party. Subsequent criticism of the government at the Vienna conference only increased the anger of those who felt the MSZDP had proved unwilling to defend the national image abroad. Bethlen did at least seek to pin the blame on the emigration rather than directly on the party leadership, but the whole episode did nothing to improve the atmosphere. Even the government’s move to redress some socialist grievances by making the minimum wage tax-free, was dismissed by the MSZDP as woefully insufficient.

In public Bethlen still sought to present his government as a model of restraint in dealing with the MSZDP. He appeared to resist calls by the right-radicals in the party led by Gömbös for a tougher response to the socialist danger. Instead, he informed a meeting of the parliamentary party on 17 August that patience was needed and nothing should be done to provoke the MSZDP. Privately, however, Bethlen demanded a further crack-down on the MSZDP. In a letter to Rakovszky, written on 11 August, he claimed that the MSZDP was using economic meetings (which did not need the approval of the authorities), to discuss political questions.

Rakovszky responded by issuing another decree to the authorities on 20 August. He now demanded that ‘anti-national’, ‘strike-causing’ groups, either secret

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28 Serfőző, A MSZDP, pp.91-100.
29 Budapesti Hírlap, 2, 3 September, 1922; Serfőző, A MSZDP, pp.108-114.
30 Budapesti Hírlap, 18 August, 1922.
31 OLK, 468, B/1, 1362.
or open, be confronted. Any political agitation by trade unions was to be prevented, their meetings monitored, and reports provided on what had occurred. The demand for reports was likely to lead to a more rigid implementation of these decrees since any display of tolerance would now have to be justified directly to the interior ministry. The singing of the Marseillaies, a traditional feature of socialist rallies, and other 'communist' symbols were also forbidden. In the countryside, no new agricultural organizations were to be allowed and special attention was to be paid to the FOSZ.\textsuperscript{32}

At a cabinet meeting held on 25 August 1922, the interior minister called for further action to be taken against the socialists. In language which can only be described as alarmist, he warned that discontent was threatening economic production, social order, and the state, and could only be prevented by the authorities bringing to light any anti-state movements. This was to be funded by a further eight million crowns, which would be kept secret from the state audit office.\textsuperscript{33} Rakovszky, by claiming that such repression was necessary to prevent economic crisis, formally rejected the argument Bencs had made in 1921 that economic decline was triggering opposition activity. Nevertheless, the extent to which the government’s mood had hardened since the previous year was demonstrated by the failure of anyone around the table to present a contrary argument. The crackdown continued into September, with the government on 9 September ordering maximum vigilance of strikes and detailed reports on all strike action. It also banned the socialist \textit{Földmívesek Lapja} on 11 September for its negative influence on agricultural workers and then refused the FOSZ permission to hold a national conference.\textsuperscript{34}

Such repression could only serve to infuriate the MSZDP and put paid to hopes that the entry of the socialists into parliament heralded a fresh chance for a rapprochement between them and the government.

\textsuperscript{32} PML, IV, 401a, 17, 13; OLK, 468, B/1, 1362.
\textsuperscript{33} Nemes, \textit{Iratok}, ii, p.167.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., p.168 and Serfőző, \textit{A MSZDP}, p.127.
Confrontation with the MSZDP

In seeking a response to this repression, the MSZDP found itself in a difficult position. It had been elected to parliament with the intention of securing reform, yet since the elections government restrictions had actually increased not diminished. Its response was to begin considering cross-party cooperation with the opposition. This was done in spite of such cooperation being forbidden in the Bethlen-Peyer agreement, and in spite of the knowledge that the government would therefore have another reason to believe that the MSZDP could not be trusted.

At its first seating following the 1922 elections, the parliamentary party decided that twenty-four MPs would be too unwieldy a decision-making body. A five-member executive committee, [Intéző Bizottság], of Peyer, Peidl, Farkas, Propper, and Vanczáék, and their secretary Illés Mónus, was given almost complete control over the rest of the MPs. It was able to decide what ideas were presented to the parliamentary party for discussion, to apply punishments for disobedience, and even to decide who should give parliamentary speeches and what areas they should concentrate on. This committee, however, often found itself divided. When the question of whether there should be cooperation with the liberal MPs came before the committee it was unable, as would occur so often, to make a clear decision. Instead it resorted to a compromise declaration that the party would 'support' an opposition bloc, but actual discussions on this would begin 'only after the clarification of the political situation'.

The MSZDP leadership was unwilling to make a complete break with the December agreement by openly forming a coalition with the liberal parties. Possibly the MSZDP leadership still believed that it could independently obtain concessions. Even renewed calls at the end of September 1922 for opposition unity as a response to Gömbös's formation of a Christian Alliance were rejected 'because of certain

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35 PTSA, 658.3, 47, pp.1-10.
36 PTSA, 658.3, 47, pp.88/89.
The very fact, however, that such cooperation was being considered should have been a warning to Bethlen of how frustrated the MSZDP was becoming. Instead discussions between the two sides, which had been occurring off and on from June onwards, finally collapsed in October without having made any progress.

The extent of the MSZDP's frustration became apparent when it finally made a further break with the December agreement and resolved to cooperate with the liberal parties. On 18 October, the executive committee informed the rest of the parliamentary party that it would now take part in the Parlamenti Élénzéki Szövetség, (Alliance of the Parliamentary Opposition), formed on 5 October. This new formation included the liberal parties as well as such prominent legitimists as István Rakovszky among its forty-seven members, and swiftly demonstrated its ability to recall parliament by providing the necessary 30 signatures. It was, however, weakened by somewhat unrealistic aspirations and the half-hearted nature of the MSZDP's involvement. Although the socialists took two of the five leadership positions, they had not helped to work out the opposition programme and did not give the new formation their unqualified support.

The MSZDP's indecisiveness was therefore damaging the opposition's ability to present a united front and obtain concessions. At the same time the party had still done enough to infuriate the government. Bencs's reports continued to attack the MSZDP. In his September situation report, he wrote that the atmosphere in the mines and factories was growing more dangerous. He also claimed that the socialists were using violence against Christian trade unionists and he directly accused the MSZDP leadership of stirring up trouble. Then, in his October report, he claimed that not only the economic crisis but also socialist agitation was to blame for growing

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37 PTSA, 658.3, 47, p.98.
38 PTSA, 658.3 47, pp.100-102.
39 The opposition block demanded supremacy of the law, the universal secret ballot on a list basis, bureaucratic and constitutional reform and the completion of land reform although Zsuzsa Nagy argues that its programme was 'conservative' and had only one real aim, the 'dismantling' of the right radical formation. See Nagy, Bethlen liberalis ellenéke, pp.90-94.
40 OLK, 808, 72, Situation Report, September 1922
opposition to the state. The general mood of these reports is demonstrated by the way they lumped together information about socialist activities and the latest strikes under the sub-heading of ‘communism’.\footnote{OLK, 808, 72, Situation Report, October 1922.}

By November 1922 Bethlen’s patience finally snapped. At a speech in Hódmezővásárhely on 19 November he lashed out at the opposition equating them to the revolutionaries of 1918.\footnote{Serfőzö, A MSZDP, p.129.} A wave of arrests of suspected communists followed, with the Budapest chief of police reporting that he had arrested 113 persons with 106 now in prison; a rather high rate of conviction.\footnote{Források Budapest történetéhez, iii, p.93.} Continuing concerns that the MSZDP and the communists were interlinked also fuelled such moves. This was not necessarily an unfounded view. Some Marxist historians also argue that by the end of 1922 members of the communist party had infiltrated the trade unions and therefore the whole of the MSZDP.\footnote{It is however possible that Nemes is simply seeking to play up the influence of the communist party in this period see Nemes, A Magyar forradalmi munkásmozgalom története, p.230. See also Források Budapest Történetéhez, iii, p.94.}

On 24 November, in the privacy of the cabinet, Bethlen for the first time declared his absolute refusal to consider the repeal of the government’s exceptional powers. Instead he declared that the legislation introduced in ‘normal times’ was insufficient. He demanded that further restrictions be imposed on immigration, the ownership of firearms, and the sale of alcohol. He also called for existing legislation on regulating censorship and the right of assembly to be tightened.\footnote{Nemes, Iratok, ii, pp.171-173.} A bill to turn the emergency powers into law was actually submitted to parliament on 6 December, although the government did not press the issue and gave it no parliamentary time to be turned into law.\footnote{Megfigyelés alatt, pp.89-91; Nemes, Iratok, ii, pp.173-174.}

Thus a change in the MSZDP’s tactics towards a more confrontational approach had actually led to yet further government repression. At the same time
further government repression ensured that calls for a more radical change in the
dparty’s tactics were likely to grow.

Growing Dissent within the MSZDP

It would be misleading to speak of an atmosphere of unmitigated repression. As Péter Sipos points out, in 1922 the MSZDP was still able to hold 631 meetings in Budapest alone. Such statistics did not, however, distract MSZDP members from the inability of their party to achieve a single concession. MSZDP MPs responded by venting their bitterness on the government. Farkas declared that the government was now abandoning even the constitutionality of the pre-war period and Propper inflamed passions with his attack on those who ‘murdered Somogyi, Bacsó, Cservenka and perhaps another ten thousand innocent workers’. Yet such attacks served only to demonstrate the continuing contradictions in the party’s position. Language like this drew sharp responses from the government and limited chances of compromise and a working relationship. At the same time, it raised the question of why the party was sitting down in parliament and offering legitimacy to a government it regarded as so repressive.

The sense of unhappiness within the party was spreading. As early as August 1922 a meeting of the party caucus, [pártválasztmány], had witnessed calls for the party to leave parliament, although the leadership ruled out any return to ‘non-European’ tactics. There were also signs of unhappiness in the party’s grass roots, something the government was well aware of. In his November report Bencs noted that in the socialist stronghold of Csepel 1200 workers had left the MSZDP trade union (although he also noted that they had nowhere else to go). Then, in December, a number of local party secretaries called for a clear decision from the party on

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47 Sipos, A szakszervezetek és a Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt, p.59.
48 Serfőző, A MSZDP, pp.132-138, 152
49 Ibid., p.108
50 OLK, 808, 72, Situation Report, November, 1922.
whether it should continue with parliamentary politics or return to ‘passivity’. Unwilling, or unable, to provide such an answer, the party leadership could only respond that the party would continue to press for reform.\(^\text{51}\)

The pressure for a change of tactics again increased when internal critics finally received a platform to express their frustrations at the XXI party congress held from 22 to 24 December 1922 - the first to be held since 1913. There were attacks on the leadership style for being authoritarian, for disregarding the countryside, and for being dominated by members of the parliamentary party. Other lines of attack were directed at ‘unprincipled’ cooperation with the liberals, a lack of results, the December 1921 agreement, and participation in the 1922 elections. The leadership in turn responded by claiming on the one hand that there had been no ‘agreement’ and, on the other hand, that ‘discussions’ had secured the release of 1500 internees.\(^\text{52}\) It still retained its authority by being reappointed, this being opposed by only fifty-eight of the approximately 250 delegates. While Farkas may have been somewhat overconfident in declaring that ‘from here we can only say that the social democratic workers stand on the parliamentary basis’, one Marxist historian could still conclude that the congress ‘although repeatedly and emphatically indicating the problems, in the end approved the policy direction of the party leadership’.\(^\text{53}\)

Nevertheless, the congress revealed the deep dissent within the party and was a warning sign that results were needed or a change in the party’s tactics would be required. Not that this in any way reassured the party’s critics in the government. Rather than seeing the congress in terms of a struggle between the moderate leadership and its ‘grass roots’ opponents, the social-political department instead chose to turn its fire on the leadership. It claimed that half the leadership was ‘radical’

\(^{51}\) PTSA, 658.13, p.124.
\(^{52}\) It is possible that financial concerns also played a role in these criticisms with the leadership appropriating up to two-thirds of the local party’s membership fees. See, Válogatott dokumentumok Csongrád megye munkásmozgalmának történetéből, pp.134-135.
and named four MPs, including Peidl, who it claimed were specifically demanding more anti-government policies.\(^\text{54}\)

The cycle of government repression, increasing bitterness and discontent within the MSZDP, a hardening of its position, and a correspondingly tough response from the government, was clearly in place. The year 1923 began by demonstrating that the government had no intention of finding a new way of doing business with the socialist opposition.

Relations Deteriorate

In spite of some moderate speeches in parliament by MSZDP MPs, Kozma still condemned the opportunism of the MSZDP. As proof, he claimed (accurately) that the party was working with the ultra-conservative legitimists in the parliament, and (inaccurately) that they had supported the coup attempt of Charles IV.\(^\text{55}\) A number of Unified Party MPs also launched new attacks on the MSZDP, focusing on the allegedly Marxist nature of the party. On 4 February Bethlen joined the fray, attacking the MSZDP for its anti-Hungarian foreign connections, in particular the emigration. He also condemned the way the party used trade unions for political purposes and declared that further measures were needed to combat the socialist danger.\(^\text{56}\)

These further measures were swiftly forthcoming. On 8 March, Rakovszky wrote to all alispáns and police chiefs ordering additional restrictions on the MSZDP’s activities. Justifying the need for such action by claiming that the party was negatively affecting economic activity, he demanded that all economic groups, (clearly including trade unions although this was unspecified), should be stopped from having ‘political meetings’. Unusually, he sought to explain what he meant by

\(^{54}\) OLK, 808, 72, Situation Report, December, 1922.

\(^{55}\) OLK, 429, 12, Situation Report, 10 February, 1923. It is surprising that Kozma himself actually made this claim since he had personally engaged in the negotiations with the MSZDP leaders in October 1921, which confirmed the party’s neutrality during the coup attempt, see Chapter 1.

\(^{56}\) Serfőzö, _A MSZDP_, pp.148-153.
this term but could only do so by giving several examples. One was of a speaker who
said workers lived better in Austria than Hungary and added that if wage negotiations
were unsuccessful they would use other weapons, (it remained unclear which of these
was the offending phrase). Another example was of a meeting where Soviet labour
laws were compared to those in Hungary. Rakovszky also demanded that all meetings
were to be strictly monitored, that the maximum punishment should be applied for all
offences, and that reports on all prosecuted cases should be sent to the ministry.\(^7\)

The decree, with its talk of maximum punishments, and its stretching of the
definition of a ‘political meeting’ almost to breaking point, provoked absolute fury
even before it began to be applied. It was leaked to the MSZDP and Rakovszky was
forced to defend it in parliament. The party was further incensed by Rakovszky’s
decision to ban its planned march to celebrate the 1848 revolution on 15 March, and
by the authorities’ decision to break up a socialist celebration marking the centenary
of Sándor Petőfi’s birth. The double standards of the government appeared to be
confirmed by its decision to allow a demonstration by right-radical student bodies
which turned violent. Indeed, while the interior minister ordered a subsequent
investigation of police conduct towards the right-radicals, Rakovszky rejected claims
that the police had ‘acted moderately’ against the socialist demonstrators.\(^8\)

Nevertheless, even more drastic steps were under consideration, with
Rakovszky informing the cabinet on 23 March 1923 that he was prepared to introduce
martial law.\(^9\) He also effectively banned the May Day celebrations by ordering the
authorities to prevent anything anti-state or internationalist on 1 May including red
symbols and socialist songs - if necessary with force of arms. The sense of alarm
eemanating from the interior ministry was also reflected in the demand that the
telephones should be constantly manned in preparation for further orders.\(^10\)

\(^{57}\) PML, IV, 401a, 18, 27. The mood of the circular was reinforced by the language used which
referred to the economic groups which should be cracked down on as ‘nemzetellenes
irányú/szociáldemokrata’.

\(^{58}\) Nemes, \(\text{Iratok, ii, p.174; Serfőző, A MSZDP, pp.158-163.}\)

\(^{59}\) Nemes, \(\text{Iratok, ii, p.174.}\)

\(^{60}\) PML, IV, 401a, 18, 20.
Indeed, the government appeared to find serious dangers wherever it looked. The fear of strikes was ever present with the army authorized on 7 April 1923 to take all necessary measures against a possible miners’ strike.\(^6^1\) Then on 27 April the same directive was issued regarding a potential general strike.\(^6^2\) Next, in May, Rakovszky ordered the authorities to stop people going to the Ruhr to work, as it would breed dissent. Bethlen also demanded a clampdown on pan-Slav agitation for fear that it would lead to the creation of a Slavic corridor in western Hungary.\(^6^3\) Equally revealing were the cases of communist agitation reported by Bencs’s social-political department, which included a sixteen or seventeen year old boy hitting a priest and a Czech mineworkers’ leader who had not mastered Hungarian.\(^6^4\) Such an atmosphere provided fertile ground for repressive legislation to flourish.

Bethlen could not disregard dissent inside the parliament quite so easily. The first months of 1923 witnessed a victory for the opposition parties including the MSZDP. Some Unified Party MPs had called for a ‘tightening’ of the standing orders governing parliament, [háyszabályok], almost immediately after the 1922 elections. Although Bethlen did not publicly comment on the issue, he privately supported this reform, allowing the justice minister to draw up a white paper which was ready by the beginning of February. The proposed reform sought to limit opportunities for obstructionism in the parliament such as filibustering. This could be regarded as a legitimate modernization of parliamentary activities, but critics were equally justified in seeing the proposals as a curtailment of the opposition’s privileges and as representing an increase in the power of the government.\(^6^5\)

It swiftly became clear that the opposition would not tolerate any changes, while Bethlen’s position was further weakened by the tensions in the Unified Party

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\(^6^1\) Nemes, Iratok, ii, pp.160-162.  
\(^6^2\) Megfigyelés alatt, pp.91-93. In August this was extended with Bethlen calling on the army to be ready to take action against any strike that may occur, see Nemes, Iratok, ii, pp.166-167.  
\(^6^3\) PML, IV, 401a, 18, 20 and OLK, 468, B/1, 925.  
\(^6^4\) OLK, 808, 72, Situation Report, December, 1922.  
\(^6^5\) Budapesti Hirlap, 29 June, 15 August, 18 November, 1922 and 2 February, 1923. For a depiction of how opposition MPs could exploit the old parliamentary rules see Gerő, The Hungarian Parliament, pp.159-165.
with the right-radicals and the agrarians. The Budapesti Hirlap declared on 8 February
that the proposals would either have to be dropped by the government or they would
be defeated. Sensing that the mood was against him, Bethlen changed tack and
distanced himself from his party’s proposals. He publicly declared that ‘neither he nor
the government favoured the restriction of the standing orders’. He did not, however,
let the matter drop. Instead another Unified Party committee was set up to consider
the proposed reforms. Furthermore, through the summer a number of county
assemblies called for these reforms to be introduced. 66 This was a sure sign that the
government was quietly seeking to build support and momentum for the reform to go
ahead.

Bethlen, therefore, cleverly maintained the pressure for, and threat of, reform,
without actually risking defeat in the parliament. Nevertheless, the episode had been
an undoubted setback for Bethlen, for he had to accept that this piece of legislation
could not yet be driven through the parliament. The opposition and the MSZDP could
not, however, make the most of their victory. While the episode was an excellent
demonstration of the benefits of engaging in parliamentary politics, it was not the
kind of issue that could generate popular approval. As far as the MSZDP’s supporters
were concerned, the party’s role was not just to prevent the government introducing
further restrictions, but also to achieve real reforms.

Against all the odds at the end of April 1923 there suddenly appeared the
possibility that the MSZDP might actually be able to secure some of these real
reforms. Bethlen needed to ensure internal stability while he was on a tour of
European capitals to drum up support for a foreign loan. He offered to recall the
parliament’s inflation committee, [drágaság bizottság], even though the parliament
was in recess, and to accept the recommendations of its opposition members. In return
he required the MSZDP to allow the parliament to remain in recess until the end of
May so that political calm would not be disturbed.

66 Budapesti Hirlap, 8, 23 February, 21 March, 28 April, 28 June, 1923.
Bethlen’s ability to swiftly abandon his hardline position, and instead appear conciliatory, persuaded the MSZDP to accept the deal. Renewed expectations, however, that this marked the beginning of a new, reformist direction in Bethlen’s policy making were swiftly dashed. Having ensured that parliament remained in recess while he was away in Europe, Bethlen fulfilled his side of the agreement, accepting the inflation committee’s recommendation that wage-agreement councils should be established, but beyond this he offered nothing. By the end of May the MSZDP was once again announcing its determination to force the government to implement reforms.67

Dissent and Division within the MSZDP

Several trade unions were, however, losing patience with the lack of results. They drafted a memorandum complaining about the failure to secure real reforms and sent a delegation on 18 June to put their complaints directly to the leadership committee of the parliamentary fraction. They argued that instead of things having improved after the party won parliamentary representation, the situation had actually got worse. They were also concerned about the party losing support and claimed that ‘the parliamentary party had lost touch with the masses’.68 In particular they demanded a more active struggle, with a focus on securing full rights of association. One delegate, Aladár Weisshaus, even declared that the system needed to be overthrown through non-parliamentary methods.

The parliamentary leaders (with the exception of Farkas who was reasonably conciliatory) were, however, dismissive of such arguments. Peidl claimed that the union delegation offered no solution, defended the parliamentary struggle as the only possible option, and rejected the claim that dissatisfaction within the party was widespread. Vanczák was even blunter, accusing the delegation of being led by the

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68 Hungarian text is ‘a frakcióknak a tömegnyomor iránt érzett érzeke elveszett’.
emigration into putting forward their complaints. Recognizing that their initial line of argument was getting nowhere, the delegation then changed tack and started calling for direct negotiations with the government. This, however, was also rejected; the only concession achieved was a promise to raise the question of conscription with the army minister. The meeting finally concluded with a statement that problems had been resolved and that there was no difference in principle between the two positions.\textsuperscript{69}

The parliamentary party had been fortunate that the trade unions' criticisms had been so weakly presented and so easily discounted. The delegation had not exposed the discrepancies in the party's position such as its belief in the parliamentary option but a refusal to enter discussions with the government - or, even more clearly contradictory, its willingness to talk to the army minister. Also the trade unions had exposed the contradictions in their own arguments by seeking both disengagement and renewed engagement with the government. In their complaint, however, that dissatisfaction was growing in the party lay the seeds of a more serious problem. The party leadership and parliamentary party were increasingly being held responsible for their failure to force the government to introduce reforms and resolve the economic crisis. The longer that perceived failure continued, the greater the pressure would be for some change of tactics. The visit of the trade union delegation served to mark an increase in that pressure.

Further evidence that relations between the government and the MSZDP were as bad as ever came on 12 July 1923, when the \textit{Népszava} was banned for six days for publishing an article by Vilmos Böhm. Böhm, former army chief of the Béla Kun dictatorship, wrote that Gömbös had supported the revolutionaries in 1919. This was almost guaranteed to provoke a sharp government reaction; in part because Böhm was a hated figure whom the government felt should not gain publicity, and in part because Bethlen was not prepared to allow a senior government figure such as

\textsuperscript{69} PTSA, 658.3, 47, pp.122-123. See also Sipos, \textit{A szociáldemokrata szakszervezetek története}, pp.152-153.
Gömbös to be besmirched by scandal. Nevertheless, when the MSZDP MPs heard of the ban they walked out of the parliament and there were even calls for a full boycott at their next meeting. A general, effective and clearly political printers’ strike added pressure on the government. Faced by such a reaction Bethlen backed down. Through intermediaries he offered to allow the paper to reappear immediately if the MSZDP disowned the article.

Far from regarding the episode as a demonstration of the party’s ability to influence the government, by the end of August 1923 the MSZDP was engaged in a bitter argument over how things could have gone so wrong. The sense of failure was increased by a war of words with the emigration over their role in provoking the crisis. A combined meeting of the party leadership and parliamentary party was held to discuss why the emigration was so furious with the Népszava’s conduct. The result was a bout of infighting. Farkas and Peidl, while threatening to resign, supported the emigration’s attacks on their colleague Vanczák, the editor of the Népszava. In return, Peyer criticized the emigration’s role in the Böhm article and another MP, Ede Hebelt, attacked them for stirring up dissent within the party. Vanczák himself demanded that the party should now break completely from the emigration.

Such feuding weakened the party, which needed to be unified to mount a serious challenge to the government. The threats of resignation also pointed to a growing sense of pessimism in the party over whether anything could realistically be expected from the Bethlen government.

Such pessimism led to a willingness to contemplate any tactic that might put further pressure on the government, even co-operation with the right-radicals. Whereas in 1922 the party had hoped that the right-radical challenge would draw the government closer to themselves, now, following the right radicals’ break with the government, the MSZDP declared that ‘the party continues the struggle not against the [Gömbös] group but rather, in the first place, against the Bethlen government’. It

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70 PTSA, 658.3, 47, p.129.
72 PTSA, 658.3, 47, p.133.
was therefore decided that nothing should be done to anger the right-radicals, as they could be 'useful'. On 27 October 1923 Peidl informed the parliamentary party that he had held discussions with the right-radicals to discuss the possibility of cooperation.\footnote{PTSA, 658.3, 47, pp.139-140, 143. \footnote{PTSA, 658.3, 47, pp.141-142.}}

A meeting on 9 October of the parliamentary party and representatives of the party leadership had also witnessed yet another bout of criticism of the party’s tactics. Sándor Rady, representing the leadership, argued that with bolshevism growing in strength and the economy deteriorating, a new radicalism was needed. But this again received a sharp response from the parliamentary party with Propper rejecting such ‘all or nothing politics’. Peidl was also critical of Rady’s argument, claiming that he offered no solutions and Bethlen would be the only beneficiary of such radicalism. Another representative of the party leadership at the meeting, Péter Gunther, then suggested that although internal party dissent could be blamed on undercover bolsheviks their dissatisfaction could be reduced if the Népszava applied a more conciliatory line towards the party’s left-wing critics. This suggestion was, however, also rejected with Propper demanding instead that the bolsheviks be dealt with, and Varnai calling for them to be kicked out of the party. The only sign of agreement between the two sides was support for Farkas’s strong attack on Bethlen, which ended the meeting on a more unified note.\footnote{PTSA, 658.3, 47, pp.139-140, 143. \footnote{PTSA, 658.3, 47, pp.141-142.}}

Yet another dispute emerged a few weeks later over whether the party should continue to cooperate with the liberal parties. At a meeting of the executive committee of the parliamentary party on 22 November 1923, Farkas called for an end to all inter-party meetings. One such meeting scheduled for later that day was immediately cancelled. The following day, Farkas returned to this issue receiving support from the committee secretary Illés Mónus. Farkas argued that such meetings served only to expose divisions between the opposition. Also the liberal parties were disregarding the whole principle of co-operation by independently putting forward
their own parliamentary demands. The debate continued at a further meeting on 26
November with Mónus now calling for new negotiations with the liberal parties
before any more inter-party conferences were attended. Peidl, however, defeated this
option with a counter-proposal that they continue attending such meetings though not
as part of any opposition block.  

The government, meanwhile, was once again taking a hard line against any
sign of dissent. On 1 August 1923, Rakovszky wrote to all föispáns expressing his
concern about the number of ‘dangerous’ meetings still occurring, and regretting that
some föispáns were not being strict enough. In a separate decree he also declared that
in the current ‘grave economic situation’ firmer measures were needed and demanded
that all meetings should be broken up at the first sign of any agitation. Concerns
about right-radical extremism added to the pressure for such moves, but fears about
left-wing agitation also remained undiminished. Bencs’s November report warned
that (unspecified) measures were needed to stop the workers moving to the left.
Kozma also warned that strikes still represented a real danger of ‘class war’ and
called for ‘the establishment of a central organ to direct the anti-strike movement’.

The situation at the end of 1923, therefore, reflected the failure of either the
government or the party to break the vicious circle that had emerged in 1922.
Government repression was continuing, socialist embitterment was growing, and
divisions within the MSZDP were becoming increasingly apparent. As for the
December 1921 agreement, it was for all intents and purposes a dead letter, capable
only of embarrassing the party leadership. Nevertheless, when necessary Bethlen had
adopted a more conciliatory approach. The growing belief within the MSZDP that
Bethlen was opposed to any further reforms, therefore, fundamentally misjudged the
situation.

75 PTSA, 658.3, 47, pp.140, 146-148.
76 PML, IV, 401a, 18, 27.
77 OLK, 808, 72, Situation Report, November 1923; OLK, 429, 1, 129. Kozma’s report is undated but
was almost certainly drawn up towards the end of the year 1923.
The Foreign Loan

The government was intent on securing a foreign loan and recognized that the support of the MSZDP would be useful. Such support would help refute claims that Hungary was too repressive to deserve a loan. It would also strengthen the government's position in parliament against those on the right who were opposed to any threat to Hungary's financial independence. As the MSZDP had repeatedly called for a foreign loan, there appeared to be no reason, in principle, why the party should not offer its full support to the government. Bethlen did seek to score political points by attacking the MSZDP for failing to clearly refute allegations that they had used a visit to London in February to argue against a loan. In the privacy of the cabinet, however, he accepted that they had not opposed a loan - 'on the contrary [he declared] they had supported it better then before'.

Theoretically, therefore, the basis for a deal guaranteeing this support was therefore in place, and Bethlen authorized several conciliatory gestures. On 4 February 1924 the regent announced an amnesty for sixty 'communists' (thirty-eight were actually in prison), which was something the MSZDP had demanded during the debates on the finance bill. Then, on 12 February, it was announced that a further amnesty was under consideration. Bethlen's rhetoric also underwent a transformation. In a speech that Serfőző describes as the 'most democratic of his life', Bethlen spoke of the 'need to ensure gradual democratic development'. Then on 14 March he offered a series of further concessions. In return for helping to pass the enabling legislation for the loan, the government would liquidate the internment camps, finally abolish the exceptional powers, close down the extreme right-wing ÉME, free all those still in prison for communist crimes, discuss how to form the wage councils, and allow the émigrés to return. There were some qualifications to these proposals. Émigrés would only be allowed to return if they had not committed any crimes in the

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78 Serfőző, A MSZDP, pp.164-165.
79 Ormos, A 1924 évi Magyar államakölcsön megszervezése, p.106.
80 See Serfőző, A MSZDP, p.192 and Budapesti Hírlap, 5, 13 February, 1924.
previous five years. Also, communists would only be released if they had not been
imprisoned for committing crimes against individuals.^^

Bethlen’s conciliatory approach and offer of a new deal, not only failed to receive a positive response from the MSZDP, but also the party’s position on the loan began to alter. When Sir William Goode, a representative of the League of Nations, enquired of Peidl whether he would support the necessary parliamentary measures for obtaining the loan, the MSZDP leader was deliberately evasive. He declared that everything depended on whether the enabling measures would benefit the working classes. Even though the party continued discussions with the justice minister on Bethlen’s offer, Peidl’s ambivalence was no basis for a quid pro quo.^^

The party did at least end its cooperation with the sharpest opponents of the loan, the right-radicals. At the end of February, Peidl was still arguing for a joint platform with all the opposition parties and the party continued to hold joint meetings with the right-radicals as well as other opposition MPs. The liberals were, however, unwilling to act in tandem with the right-radicals. At a meeting of the parliamentary party on 1 March 1924 the choice was made to side with the liberals to preserve a united left opposition.^^

The executive committee of the parliamentary party had laid out on 27 February, two alternative courses of action the party could take in response to the government’s plan for a foreign loan. Either the party would strongly oppose the necessary loan measures or it would criticize but not obstruct them. With opinions divided, the issue was discussed at a meeting with the trade unions which witnessed renewed calls for a parliamentary boycott and a general strike. Finally on 4 April the parliamentary party decided that it would conduct a ‘hard struggle’ against the loan.

Several historians have claimed that it was the scale of the enabling measures that finally drove the MSZDP into confrontation with the government. A consideration of the actual measures hardly seems, however, to support this

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81 PTSA, 658.3, 47, p.163
82 PTSA, 658.3, 47, pp.165-169.
83 PTSA, 658.3, 47, p.159. Budapesti Hirlap, 22,23 February, 1924.
perception. The package included such innocuous legislation as the ratification of the peace treaties with Czechoslovakia and Italy and the completion of payments owed to France. The establishment of a national bank also seems an implausible reason for rejecting the package. Admittedly, the finance bill did grant complete authority over financial matters to the government for six months. However such bills were the normal way of passing financial legislation in Hungary and had been presented to parliament each year by the Bethlen government.94

It seems probable that there were other reasons why the MSZDP opted to challenge rather than work with the government. As we have noted above, the leadership was under growing pressure from within the party to adopt a more confrontational approach. It was also fearful of being accused of any more pacts. The MSZDP leadership also wanted to increase co-operation with the liberals and may also have been hopeful that a tough line would squeeze more concessions out of the government. Perhaps most importantly the MSZDP was deeply mistrustful of Bethlen’s offers, which had not produced the desired reforms either in December 1921 or in April 1923.

Bethlen exploited the MSZDP’s opposition to the loan by making some political capital at their expense. He claimed the party’s tactics were based not on principles but on seeking to ‘exploit the situation for political goals’.85 The socialists’ arguments were also inconsistent, with one speaker opposing the measures on the grounds that they would give too much authority to the government, while another opposed them on the grounds that ‘it would finish Hungary as an independent state’.86 Even the ‘hard struggle’ was not carried out particularly thoroughly. Kozma noted that the socialists’ speeches on the loan were actually less critical than those of the right-radicals.87

84 Magyar törvénytár, 1924, pp.6-77.
87 OLK, 429, 12, Situation Reports of 11 and 31 April, 1924.
Nor was the government ever in danger of losing the debate, particularly as some of the opposition MPs such as Albert Apponyi supported the measures. The obstructionist tactics of the MSZDP and others did, however, persuade Bethlen to make a fresh attempt to make a deal with the MSZDP. He was eager to avoid a continuation of the debate after the Easter recess, and fresh discussions were arranged between the justice minister and MSZDP representatives on the final Monday of the session. The government now offered to finally liquidate the internment camps, ensure all prosecutions were brought before the judiciary, allow the return of all émigrés who had not committed offences in the last five years, guarantee that they would not face any new charges, and open discussions on establishing wage councils. In return, the socialists had to drop their opposition to the loan package. While concerns about the offer were still raised at a subsequent meeting of the parliamentary party the agreement was formally accepted on 18 April 1924. The loan was therefore passed before Easter and the MSZDP was able to secure the first real reforms since the December agreement.\textsuperscript{88}

The price paid was however heavy. The MSZDP had allowed itself to be drawn independently into an agreement with the government. This revealed that opposition unity, and the party’s supposedly principled opposition to the loan measures, was entirely illusory. This, in turn, handed Bethlen a tremendous propaganda victory. It seems, furthermore, probable that the MSZDP could have secured these concessions, perhaps even a more substantial package including the complete abolition of the exceptional powers, if they had supported the loan measures from the beginning. Finally, renewed allegations of ‘back room deals’ and collaboration with the government could only fuel the criticisms of opponents within the MSZDP who argued that this was another example of the parliamentary party and the party leadership betraying the wider party’s interests. So concerned was the leadership about a hostile reception that although reports of a deal with the

\textsuperscript{88} Serfőző, A MSZDP, pp.204-205; PTSA, 658.3, 47, pp.195-204.
government had leaked into some of the papers, the *Népszava* claimed that the party in no way either ‘asked for concessions or received them’.  

Pressure on the MSZDP’s Moderate Wing

Critics of the MSZDP leadership had been building up their strength within the party. They had already achieved prominence in the trade union movement. Indeed a trade union conference held at the end of March 1924 witnessed sustained attacks on the tactics of the MSZDP and renewed calls for the party to abandon parliament. Furthermore, the internal opposition ‘had extended its influence to the majority of the Budapest district branch and a large part of the local party branches’. New opposition leaders were also emerging, such as Aladár Weishaus and István Vági.

At the XXII party congress, which began at Easter, they were able to provide a focus for a number of sharp attacks on the leadership and current party policy. The attacks themselves had, however, a familiar tone. The parliamentary party and party leadership were criticized for not listening to the wider party, making secret pacts, abandoning the countryside, and failing to secure real reforms.

Marxist historians, keen to demonstrate that the leadership had lost the support of the party, probably overestimated the importance of such criticisms. It is worth noting that the report presented on the parliamentary party’s activities was accepted by the conference and the leadership committee was re-elected. Nevertheless, the leadership was forced to make bitter attacks on the government in an attempt to demonstrate its own independence. It was also forced to continue denying, in ever more strident terms, that there were any secret agreements with the government. Viewed overall, this party congress, just like its predecessor, while not directly

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90 Sipos, A szociáldemokrata szakszervezetek története, p.153; Budapesti Hírlap, 1 April, 1924.
91 Nemes, A Magyar forradalmi munkásmozgalom története, p.237
altering party policy, did increase the pressure for a change in the parliamentary party’s tactics.\(^{92}\)

The divisions within the party were by now clearly known to the government. It had received detailed reports of the MSZDP conference and Kozma reflected this in his own situation reports. On 11 April he noted that the trade unions were attacking the party for not defending the workers’ interests. Then, on 31 April, he reported that although the party had grown stronger over the last four years it was now divided, with the internal opposition seeking, albeit unsuccessfully, to throw out the party leadership.\(^{93}\)

Rather than making any moves to strengthen the position of the moderate wing of the MSZDP, however, the government reverted to its policy of cracking down on any signs of dissent. Rakovszky again effectively banned the May Day celebrations. He demanded that the authorities prevent all meetings, demonstrations, etc. on 1 May and the previous three days which were opposed to the ‘idea of the state’, [állameszme], if necessary by force of arms. In particular he demanded that the use of red colours, red symbols, the singing of the Marseillaies, and other similar songs be stamped out. He added to the state of alarm by demanding that the telephones be manned and the army put on a state of alert.\(^{94}\)

The rather disingenuous approach of the government to its infringements on the right of association is demonstrated by Kozma’s claim that the restrictions on the May Day celebrations were not directed at the MSZDP as they affected all parties equally - a point which not only ignored the specifically anti-socialist language in the interior minister’s orders, but also appeared to overlook the fact that 1 May was an almost exclusively socialist celebration.\(^{95}\)


\(^{93}\) OLK, 429, 12, Situation Reports, 11 and 31 April, 1924. An excerpt from police reports of the MSZDP congress is given in Dokumentumok a Magyar forradalmi munkásmozgalom történeteből, 1919-1929, pp.215-218.

\(^{94}\) PML, IV, 401a, 19, 27.

\(^{95}\) OLK, 429, 12, Situation Report, 23 May, 1924.
The socialists were not reassured by government statistics showing the vast majority of meetings were permitted. These statistics also included trade union meetings, which were expected to take place anyway. Furthermore, the MSZDP naturally paid more attention to those meetings that were forbidden than to those that were permitted. A report on each case of a forbidden meeting was forwarded to party headquarters and these arrived in a steady stream, providing the appearance of continuous government repression.

The range of reasons the authorities were prepared to offer for banning party meetings heightened this impression. For example, in a five week period from the end of June 1924, the authorities turned down a meeting in Vámosmikolai on the grounds that the party had earlier been operating in secret; in Tamás on the grounds that the party had failed to give the required three days notice; in Szombathely as it was claimed it would endanger consolidation; and in Békés county because the applicant failed to submit his exact name and address and also because the meeting would endanger relations between workers and employers. In Pest county a request for a meeting to form the Magyarországi Földmunkások Szövetsége, (Hungarian Association of Agricultural Workers), was rejected and its members were banned from operating in the entire county. Another meeting was turned down in Tatabánya because it would be held in the open air.

Even the concessions achieved by the party during the loan debates appeared to lose some of their sparkle when it became clear that the government was once again not prepared to keep entirely to the spirit of the agreement. Not only was no progress made on discussions on the wage councils but there was also real anger when it emerged that the ambassador in Vienna was only providing passports to émigrés who agreed to abstain from politics for five years after their return. Also, one of the returnees, Jakab Weltner, was warned that new charges were being prepared

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96 Official statistics forwarded to Bethlen by the interior minister claimed that the MSZDP had 3137 meetings permitted throughout 1923 and only 94 forbidden, while other parties had 22 meetings forbidden and 999 allowed. For the first two months of 1924 the MSZDP had had 935 meetings permitted and only two stopped. See OLK, 808, 61, 2.
97 PTSA, 658.6, pp.197, 219, 252, 297, 300, 301.
against him. It was also reported that on informing the police about death threats, which had been made against him, he was advised to leave the country. Further discussions with the justice minister followed. The party was reassured that although new charges could be made against returning émigrés they would be through the normal channels and Weltner was offered police protection. They were, however, also informed that Bethlen was determined to prevent émigrés involving themselves in politics. These petty restrictions turned the return of the émigrés into a new dispute rather than a victory for the MSZDP, and this impression was heightened by the continuing refusal of the most prominent of the socialist émigrés, Garami, to return home.

The MSZDP's Change of Tactics

Further underlining the party's weaknesses was its failure to achieve concrete results when it began a new push for help for the unemployed. Negotiations with the responsible minister, József Vass, led to promises of a works programme for the capital and legislation on the introduction of some form of unemployment benefit by 16 August 1924, but nothing came of this. The explanation for this becomes clear from the minutes of the 1 August cabinet meeting, which discussed the unemployment question. Not only were doubts cast on the MSZDP's claims about the numbers unemployed (the government refused to count anyone receiving any kind of paid work), but also the finance minister noted that 'unfortunately he could do nothing'.

The best that the welfare minister could promise to opposition leaders when he appeared before the parliament's committee for financial reconstruction, was that 'the government will do everything in its power so that this

99 Serfőzö, A MSZDP, p.218.
100 Even the government's limited plans for public works were unlikely to directly benefit those unemployed in industrial centres, as they were focused primarily on developing the woefully inadequate rural infrastructure. See Nemes, Iratok, iii, pp.284-287.
temporary unemployment will be conquered’. He pointed out that the trade unions also had a responsibility in this matter, demanding that ‘they do not increase the present difficulties of economic life with thoughtless strikes’. Stung by its failure to achieve results through negotiations, the party now demanded, successfully, the recall of parliament to discuss the question and prepared to step-up co-operation with the liberal parties.

The first sign that the party was adopting a new strategy came in the debate on a new franchise for the local government elections in Budapest, the previous franchise having expired in 1923. The new franchise proposed by the government was, however, even more restrictive than that used in the 1922 elections, something opposition MPs did not fail to point out. Garami, for example, was already calling for a boycott of the elections in June 1924 but the parliamentary party remained uncertain about how to proceed when it discussed the matter on 2 July.

It was left up to the leadership committee to make the decision and on 22 September it finally called for a boycott of Budapest elections. This was a clear indication that the party was now prepared to adopt much more confrontational tactics. It was the MSZDP’s first boycott of any elections since the December 1921 agreement and also signalled the end of any further socialist cooperation with the right-radicals and legitimists, which had still been quietly occurring up until June 1924. The right-wing opposition supported the government’s intention to prevent Budapest from becoming the preserve of socialists and liberals, and clashed with the MSZDP in parliament.

The next sign that the MSZDP was hardening its position came at a meeting of the parliamentary party’s executive committee on 29 September 1924. A representative of the party leadership, József Büchler, called for an immediate change in party tactics. Büchler argued that widespread dissatisfaction within the party and the parliamentary party’s lack of success required the MSZDP’s immediate

101 Nemes, Iratok, iii, pp.281-284.
102 Serfőzö, A MSZDP, p.218.
withdrawal from parliament. Mónus, Farkas and Propper all agreed in principle but were concerned about the timing. Only Peidl completely rejected Büchler’s proposal, claiming that it was ‘opposed to the substance of parliamentarianism’. His opposition succeeded in watering down the declaration of the meeting. This gave support in principle for a parliamentary boycott but also accepted the need for co-operation with the liberals, and gave no inkling of when or how such a boycott might be carried out.¹⁰⁴

Then, at the end of October, the parliamentary party again came under fire at a joint meeting with the party leadership and trade union representatives. The unions warned that the entire country was on the brink of economic collapse, claimed that discontent was continuing to grow within the party, and reported that the unemployed were blaming everything on the party’s tactics in parliament. Beyond these complaints, there were demands for increased activity in the countryside, a drive to obtain loans for the unemployed and the publishing of party goals. For the first time the parliamentary party accepted such criticisms without objection.¹⁰⁵

Both these meetings demonstrate just how much the mood within the parliamentary party had altered. It no longer had the determination to fight against its critics in the party. Indeed, with the exception of Peidl, the executive committee had now accepted that a boycott might be necessary. As Serfőző perceptively notes, internal opposition within the party and the government’s continuing failure to realize at least some of the party’s aspirations meant the parliamentary party was caught ‘between two fires’. This forced most of the MSZDP’s MPs to accept that a change of tactics was necessary.¹⁰⁶

There was, however, no clear notion of how such a change of tactics should manifest itself. Indeed divisions within the parliamentary party over how to proceed were clearly demonstrated by the news on 6 October 1924 that Rassay was proposing the immediate formation of a new liberal-socialist alliance. At the subsequent joint

¹⁰⁴ PTSA, 658.3, 47, pp.220-221.
¹⁰⁵ PTSA, 658.3, 47, p.236.
¹⁰⁶ Serfőző, A MSZDP, p.217.
meeting of the MPs and the party leadership, Farkas, Imre Szabó, Mór Rothenstein, Dániel Várnai and Jenő Horowitz rejected any alliance, with several of them sharply attacking the liberals for being ‘unserious’ and ‘untrustworthy’. In contrast, Peidl, Propper, Büchler, Emil Pickler, Géza Malasits and Ede Hébelt favoured an alliance and Mónus argued that that they should do nothing until the liberals’ goals became clear. Eventually, all the participants with the exception of Horowitz voted for Lajos Kitajka’s compromise motion that discussions should continue with the liberals but no alliance should yet be agreed. Even after the parliamentary party finally agreed to join the new liberal formation, the Országos Demokratikus Szövetség, (National Democratic Alliance), on 23 October, the decision was sharply criticized at a meeting of the party caucus called to approve the decision, on the grounds that it limited the party’s radicalism.

The increasingly radical mood within the MSZDP coincided with the beginning of a sustained period of legislative activity as the government sought to tie up the loose ends which had been delayed by the land reform and loan legislation. As well as a new franchise for Budapest, there was also a need to confirm in law the 1922 franchise decree for the parliamentary elections. Furthermore, the government finally decided to introduce a bill to tighten the house rules, similar to the one drafted but never presented in the spring of 1923. This indicated that Bethlen was now confident that with the opposition increasingly divided he could get the measure through. It was also certain, however, that this step would further infuriate the liberal parties and the MSZDP. Bethlen had therefore chosen to present some of the most contentious legislation in his programme at the very time that the mood within the MSZDP and wider opposition had hardened against him. Whether it was his intention

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107 PTSA, 658.3, 47, pp.222-225.
108 Serfőzõ, A MSZDP, p.231. The new demands of the new formation were for a general secret ballot, a referendum on the constitution, a free and democratic bureaucracy, legal equality and freedom of association, a general amnesty and the return of émigrés, the end of all extraordinary powers, a simplified tax system, credits for agriculture and measures against unemployment and inflation. See Magyország története, ii, p.521.
or not, the probability of a serious clash between the two sides had become much more likely.

The Parliamentary Boycott Begins

Determined to regain the initiative and seeking to embarrass members of the government who had become embroiled in the so-called ‘Esküdt scandal’ of 1921, the MSZDP resurrected the case of Lajos Esküdt. There may also have been some hope that they could exploit dissatisfaction among government party MPs about the lack of progress on agrarian issues. When an MSZDP MP sought, however, to raise the question of Bethlen’s involvement in the affair on 28 November 1924, both he and a prominent liberal Lajos Szilágyi clashed with the speaker and were expelled from the house; the liberal and MSZDP MPs followed.

At this point, negotiations still appeared likely to resolve the dispute swiftly. Nemes claims that Bethlen offered to allow the suspended MPs to return and declared that he would tolerate nominated opposition figures raising questions about his role in the Esküdt affair. He required in return that the opposition not obstruct the debate on the reform of the house rules. This, however, was rejected by the opposition who demanded instead that the new franchise bill should first go before parliament before any reform of the house rules were considered. They also demanded that Bethlen ‘put forward a statement in favour of the introduction of the secret ballot’.

Another set of proposals is recorded in the MSZDP minutes of their 1 December meeting with the opposition. Bethlen was reported to be proposing that the opposition should not obstruct the house reforms so that there was time for this bill and a finance bill to be passed by 1 January 1925. In return he would not use the guillotine on the electoral law and would give a free vote on the secret ballot. This

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109 Very little research has been carried out on the agrarian faction within the Unified Party beyond József Nagy’s analysis. Dissatisfaction was eventually alleviated by a new package of government concessions, the death of Nagyatádi-Szabó, and his replacement by the more compliant and certainly less charismatic Zoltan Mesko, See Nagy, A Kiszazda csoport, pp.246-250.

110 Nemes, Iratok, iii, p.64.
was dismissed as nothing new, but a sign of moderation did creep in with the acceptance that a guillotine on financial bills would be tolerated. Furthermore, according to the minutes of the meeting a proposal by the deputy speaker of the house, Tibor Zsitvay, that inter-party negotiations should take place was accepted by the meeting.\footnote{PTSA, 658.3, 47, pp.239-241.}

Zsitvay in his own records of these discussions claims that they concerned yet another set of proposals. He writes that the opposition demanded the resignation of the speaker, Béla Scitovszky, who had first provoked the dispute, and the return of the suspended MPs. In return they would accept some moderate reforms of the house rules. Bethlen was even prepared to offer to extend the secret ballot to all the cities including industrial centres such as Ozd and Dorog to confirm the deal. However Zsitvay claims that any chance of a deal collapsed due to a leading liberal Pál Hegymegi’s opposition, even though Peidl and Vazsonyi were in favour.\footnote{Zsitvay Tibor emlékiratai, Budapest, 1999, pp.110-111.}

Certain individuals and particular grievances may have indeed halted negotiations between the two sides. The real problem with all these proposals was, however, that they allowed the scope of the discussions to incorporate not only the conduct of the speaker of the house but also questions of legislation. Thus the whole issue was transformed from an argument about a point of order into a major political dispute. Even worse for any hope of an agreement, both sides presumed they had the upper hand; the opposition because it presumed that the boycott would threaten nationally and internationally the legitimacy of the government; the government because Bethlen believed that the opposition would have to return if it was to present any challenge to his parliamentary programme. In this respect it is worth noting Bethlen’s reported comment to Zsitvay on hearing that the opposition had rejected his proposals: ‘perhaps this is for the best! They will return to the house without concessions’.\footnote{Ibid, p.111.}
The result was an impasse made worse by the decision of the parliament’s immunity committee, [mentelmi bizottság], to confirm the expulsion of the opposition MPs for a number of sittings. Events then escalated as forty-four of the 245 MPs declared on 1 December that they had begun a full parliamentary boycott. They formed a six member leadership committee of three socialists and three liberals, renamed themselves the Demokratikus Ellenéki Pártok Blokkja, (Block of Democratic Opposition Parties), and restated the twelve demands of the 23 October 1924 programme. It is, however, doubtful if even the opposition believed such ideas were likely to be implemented. The MSZDP privately decided that it would be better if they focused their energies on the secret ballot question. Nevertheless, the real development was that an argument over a point of order had provided the MSZDP with an incentive, and an excuse, to directly challenge the government with a full parliamentary boycott.

Breaking the Boycott

Bethlen sought to break the opposition with all manner of tactical moves, designed to punish, threaten, placate, and pressure the opposition to accept his proposals for resolving the dispute. He forbade the street sale of Népszava and banned several meetings planned in support of the boycott. He proceeded with the reform of the house rules, benefiting from the absence of the opposition MPs, and they were passed into law as early as 21 December 1924. In a direct riposte to the opposition’s call for the abolition of the exceptional powers, Bethlen authorized the interior minister to present a bill giving them full legal status although he again provided no time for it to be passed into law. He also appealed to reformist sensibilities by finally abolishing the internment camps. Then he declared in an interview with the Austrian

114 PTSA, 658.3, 47, pp.242, 245-246.
Neue Freie Presse newspaper at Christmas that he was prepared to reveal the details of the agreement he had concluded with the MSZDP in December 1921.\(^{115}\)

This last move initially appeared not to be as damaging to the MSZDP as Bethlen might have hoped. The party leadership had already admitted the existence of the agreement to the executive committee on 14 November and avoided serious censure. Its existence, furthermore, had long been proclaimed by the internal opposition who could make little capital from the party leadership’s new-found honesty. Further reassurance came when the liberal parties were informed of the details of the December agreement and duly responded that they did not regard it as dangerous. The partial publication of the agreement in Népszava also drew a muted response.\(^{116}\)

The only remaining potential for trouble about the December 1921 agreement now came from the emigration and Peidl was dispatched to reassure them on the matter. When, however, Peidl reported back to the fraction leadership on 19 January the news could hardly have been worse. Not only had the Second International ordered an inquiry into the agreement, but Garami was now demanding that those who had signed the agreement should resign. This was enough to produce open conflict within the parliamentary party, bringing to the surface the arguments about the agreement which appeared to have been papered over. Peyer defended the agreement and (accurately) recalled that the entire leadership had authorized the negotiations. Peidl, in response, attacked the contents of the agreement and Propper attacked Peyer for even participating in the negotiations.\(^{117}\)

It remains unclear why Peidl and Propper chose this moment to attack the agreement; after all they had known of it and had continued to work with its signatories. It is also unclear why the party delegation dispatched to visit Garami on 24 January decided to turn its fire not on the agreement but directly on to the emigration. Both Propper and Mónus attacked Garami for causing trouble. Buchinger

\(^{115}\) Nemes, A Magyar Forradalmi Munkásmozgalom története, p.238; PTSA 658.3, 247.


\(^{117}\) PTSA, 658.3, 47, p.254.
joined in the attack and Peyer again protested that the leadership had been informed ‘point by point’ of the agreement. The party’s fury at Garami only increased when he announced he would not support them at the Second International’s inquiry. The view now was that Garami, until this point acknowledged as the driving force behind the party both intellectually and tactically, had chosen to break from them. Bethlen could not have foreseen such a result when he threatened to publicize the agreement. Instead the damage done to the parliamentary party’s and the wider party’s sense of unity and morale had been entirely self-inflicted: an example of the MSZDP’s remarkable ability to descend into infighting at the most inopportune moments.

Relations with the liberals were also on rocky ground; the MSZDP opposed Vázsonyi’s proposals to abandon demands for proportional representation. They also rejected his proposal that Apponyi should be used as an intermediary, on the grounds that he was too pro-government. The failure of the opposition to co-ordinate their actions was further demonstrated by the liberals’ unilateral decision to continue picking up their wages from the parliament. The MSZDP (putting financial considerations before absolute adherence to principles) decided to follow suit. Several MSZDP MPs chose, however, to publicly condemn any weakening of the liberals’ position. Propper attacked their ‘two-faced politics’ and Imre Györki claimed that Rassay and Vázsonyi would be punished at the next elections if they continued to leave the workers in the lurch. This was as effective a way as any of exposing the divisive nature and weaknesses of the opposition.

More bad news came from within the parliament where, misunderstanding what had occurred when the MSZDP delegation met Garami, the party was condemned for still being led by the emigration. Nevertheless, some kind of discussions with the government must have been continuing as a new proposal from Bethlen that five further industrial districts should be granted the secret ballot came

118 PTSA, 658.3, 37, pp.259-265.
119 PTSA, 658.3, 47, pp.252, 267-270.
120 OLK, 808, 55, 22.
121 Serfőzö, A MSZDP, pp.249-250.
before the parliamentary party for discussion on 7 February. This provided the first opportunity for critics of the boycott to demand a return to parliament. The atmosphere among the MSZDP MPs was made worse by dissatisfaction with the way decisions were being taken.

Malasits attacked the way the executive committee had kept information on their discussions with Bethlen secret from the rest of the MPs. He may also have been unhappy with another of their decisions to levy a fine of 100,000 crowns on anyone absent without due cause from a parliamentary party’ meeting.\(^{122}\) He now argued that they should consider returning to the parliament, a view supported by Rothenstein, who attacked the boycott for having no clear goals and Szabó, who stressed that the MSZDP was and should remain a parliamentary party. The leadership, however, rejected such ideas with Peyer arguing that if the boycott was unsuccessful the only alternative was to resign their mandates. Even Peidl, formerly a staunch defender of the parliamentary struggle, now declared that ‘we have not achieved anything with parliamentarianism’ and proclaimed that only if the full secret ballot were introduced should the party return to parliament. Farkas also defended the boycott, claiming that ‘the boycott has had no result up to now because if there had been a result then we would not now be in the boycott’. The circularity of this argument appears to have passed unnoticed.\(^{123}\)

Opposition among MSZDP MPs to continuing the boycott increased at the end of the month on news that several liberals were thinking of re-entering the parliament. Concerns were also raised at a meeting on 21 February 1925 about the declining economy and the restrictions imposed by Bethlen as a response to the boycott. Bethlen also cleverly added to the pressure by introducing the franchise bill for the parliamentary elections on 4 February, provoking fresh calls to abandon the boycott.\(^{124}\)

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\(^{122}\) PTSA, 658.3, 47, pp.267-271.

\(^{123}\) PTSA, 658.3, 47, pp.275-281.

\(^{124}\) PTSA, 658.3, 47, pp.285-297. The atmosphere in the fraction was further affected by concerns over Pickler’s behaviour with demands that he resign from his position as a member of a Jewish religious
Bethlen then offered the carrot of five places for the liberals and socialists on the twenty-five person committee set up to discuss the franchise bill. This was enough to persuade Mónus to call at the next executive committee meeting on 4 March for a return to parliament. He pointed out that they would be blamed if the government was able to pass the new franchise without amendments because the opposition continued the boycott. The rest of the leadership, however, remained firm with Propper (following a ‘damned if we do, damned if we don’t’ line of argument) claiming that if they returned now they would be blamed for missing the previous debates. Farkas was also obstinate that the boycott was more important then ‘the reaction’s latest law’, while Peidl argued that they could not give up the boycott without some kind of guaranteed concession. He sought to improve the mood by claiming that ‘from a party and political viewpoint the boycott up to now has had a good effect’.

Yet while the leadership remained committed to the boycott, the rest of the parliamentary party was exhibiting a growing loss of faith in the whole process. The atmosphere was not helped by confirmation that two liberal MPs had returned to parliament. Furthermore, it also emerged that the trade union council, [szakszervezeti tanács], had engaged in negotiations with the government on the unemployment question. This angered some in the party who failed to see why the party could not now re-enter negotiations with the government. At the 7 March 1925 parliamentary party meeting, Gyula Baticz, Samu Jászai, Malasits, Mónus, Ferenc Reisinger, Rothenstein, Varnai, and Lajos Deutsch (as a representative of the party leadership) all spoke in favour of abandoning the boycott. They were joined by Peyer, who directly repudiated Peidl’s earlier argument by claiming that the population had turned against the boycott. Nevertheless, when a vote was taken, there were only four votes against continuing the boycott.

organization, and accusations that in parliament he often sat not with the rest of the party but with the Christian Socialist, József Szabó.

125 PTSA, 658.3, 47, pp.310-317.
126 PTSA, 658.3, 47, pp.319-335.
Péter Sipos claims that the division over tactics was between the party’s trade unionists who were concerned about the boycott and the politicians, [pártpolitikusok], who supported its continuation. Sipos’s approach is, however, too simplistic. There was now dissent and division among all groups and at all levels of the party.\footnote{Sipos, A szociáldemokrata szakszervezetek története, p.154.}

On the surface, however, the party sought to give the appearance that it was united in its determination to continue the boycott. The Népszava continued to make a show of inflexibility, proclaiming that the party ‘fights for the universal secret ballot, not secrecy for a few constituencies’. Furthermore, the party caucus approved the parliamentary party’s 7 March decision to continue the boycott and added an accompanying resolution, which rejected participation in the committee to discuss the new law, even though leading liberal MPs such as Vilmos Vázsonyi, and Dezső Szilágyi had agreed to take part.

In response Bethlen hardened his own position by publicly declaring that he would no longer negotiate with the ‘revolutionary’ socialist party. He also allowed the franchise committee, dominated by the government party, to propose that the secret ballot should be standardized, and thus withdrawn from all (four) localities that elected a single MP. At the same time, he cleverly distanced himself from this by declaring that he did not support this proposal and stated that a new vote on the committee’s recommendations should take place. This enabled him to leave open the possibility of extending the secret ballot while at the same time allowing his party to threaten that the secret ballot would actually be further restricted.\footnote{Serfőző, A MSZDP, pp.252, 259-262.}

These developments did not, however, provide an opportunity for a reconsideration of the MSZDP’s position. Instead, the executive committee of the parliamentary party prevented further discussion of the boycott claiming that the decision of the party caucus was final. Rothenstein and Jaszai were even prevented from raising the issue of the boycott as late as the 20 April. For good measure the executive committee also ruled out the possibility of further negotiations with
Bethlen. The absurdity of the situation, in which for almost two months the executive committee took the most important political question off the agenda, reflected both its ability to dominate the fraction and a probable fear of being outvoted if the issue was put to a vote.

Bethlen did not rush to have the franchise bill passed. Instead, it made its leisurely way through the parliament, gradually increasing the likelihood that it would be passed without the MSZDP making a single counter-argument. By the end of April 1925 even the executive committee recognized that the current situation could not be maintained. Under the pretext of discussing the renewed threat of prosecution for the returning émigrés, the committee authorized Győrki, the most vocal supporter of the boycott among the wider parliamentary party, to discuss the boycott with the justice minister. The sense of crisis became clear at another meeting of the executive committee, called to discuss both Györki’s report and the news that some of the liberals were prepared to return to parliament by 5 May. The possibility raised by Győrki of formal discussions with the government was however rejected, although he was instructed to continue to negotiate informally. The talk now was of giving up their parliamentary seats, with both Peyer and Farkas proposing this solution. Peidl was only able to dissuade them with his advice that everything should wait until the bloc collapsed, a truly appalling reason for continuing with a policy. Even worse, the committee was becoming more secretive about its decisions. Not only did it not inform the wider parliamentary party of Győrki’s negotiations, but also the liberal parties were also not informed until twenty days later, on 25 May.

On 6 May, the executive committee again met (for the third time in a row without including the wider parliamentary party) to discuss Győrki’s negotiations. He reported that Bethlen was now proposing either that the general secret ballot would be introduced after the next elections or that a further ten constituencies would immediately receive the secret ballot. Both offers were contingent on the party

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engaging in direct negotiations with Bethlen. Far from regarding this, however, as the long-awaited breakthrough the MSZDP’s reaction was dismissive. The party’s distrust of Bethlen built up over the previous years ensured that Peidl could, without dissent, dismiss the first proposal on the grounds that Bethlen was ‘untrustworthy’. As regards the second proposal of a further ten secret ballot constituencies, the long duration of the boycott had served to increase expectations of, and the need for, greater success. It too was rejected on the grounds that it was ‘absolutely meaningless’. Propper, Farkas and Peidl opposed even the idea of direct negotiations. Only Vanczák was persuaded by Bethlen’s proposals to change his position and support Mónus’s view that the party should return to parliament.\(^{131}\)

News received the following day that Szilágyi’s group had abandoned the boycott finally forced the executive committee to raise the question with the entire parliamentary party and the party leadership. In an atmosphere made worse by news that the holding of this emergency meeting had been leaked to the press (blamed on the unfortunate Pickler who it was claimed had been gossiping with his uncle) MPs and the wider party representatives finally had the opportunity to vent their frustration at the way the boycott had been handled. Reisinger criticized the secretive nature of the leadership, Varnai attacked the lack of consistency in the fraction leadership’s tactics, Jaszáí claimed the boycott had only made matters worse, while Deutsch described the arguments for continuing the boycott as ‘absolutely laughable’. It was clear that the majority view was that the fraction should return to parliament, something that even Farkas had now come round to accepting. Only Propper continued to argue for a boycott, calling Deutsch a ‘defeatist’ and sneering at those who only now had begun to criticise the leadership’s decisions.\(^{132}\)

The unpleasant atmosphere filtered into the next committee meeting held on 14 May 1925. News that Bethlen was prepared to offer further concessions if talks took place did nothing to alleviate the sense of failure. The meeting responded by

\(^{131}\) PTSA, 658.3, 47, pp.359-361.

\(^{132}\) PTSA, 658.3, 47, pp.363-382.
ruling out direct negotiations with the government. Instead Peidl and Peyer offered their resignations, (which were not accepted) and Peyer added a personal attack on Farkas. At yet another meeting of the leadership committee on 22 May it became clear that the only question now was how the party could extricate itself from the boycott. Vanczák argued that they should seek a concession of five further secret ballot seats. Mónus and Weltner proposed, however, no further negotiations so as to avoid any fresh accusation that a new ‘pact’ had been made with the government.  

When the issue was again put to the entire parliamentary party at another joint meeting with the party leadership on 25 May (news of which had again been leaked to the press), even Propper accepted the need for a ‘temporary’ end to the boycott, although he still managed to launch another attack on the ‘defeatist’ Deutsch. Such was the desire to return to parliament that no one present spoke of holding out until some form of concession on the secret ballot had been achieved. The following day, the fraction, together with the few remaining liberals who had maintained the boycott, returned to parliament without having achieved a single concession from the government.

Conclusion

The failure of the boycott can in part be put down to the way it was conducted. Its goals were either idealistic and unrealistic or decided on separately by each party involved in the boycott (note the disagreements between the MSZDP and Vázsonyi over where the emphasis should be), or even worse, were simply left unspecified. Even though an opposition leadership committee had been established, none of the parties were willing to submit to its authority. Instead they concealed information from each other, made independent and at times conflicting decisions, and revealed their growing disunity to the government. The decision to announce the boycott was

133 PTSA, 658.3, 47, pp.388-403.
made as a joint statement by all concerned on 1 December 1924; by May 1925 each of the parties was making its own decision, based on its own likely benefits, to give up the boycott.

The MSZDP's own weaknesses also undermined the boycott. The authoritarian nature of the executive committee caused increasing resentment among the wider parliamentary party, limited opportunities for discussion, and placed a great deal of pressure on a small group of individuals, with predictably disastrous results. The desire to apportion blame for the December 1921 agreement, and the subsequent arguments with the emigration, only added to the negative atmosphere which was made even worse by a willingness among some figures to resort to personal abuse of their colleagues.

Furthermore, the party had entered the boycott as a negotiating position from which to secure concessions. The necessary precondition for such a result is trust that the other side will carry through its promises. This was, however, entirely absent. Substantial offers, such as Bethlen's promise that he would introduce secret ballot voting after the next elections, were dismissed out of hand because he could not be trusted. If, however, Bethlen could not be trusted in this regard, why should he be trusted on any other promised concession? The party had decided to rely on achieving concessions while at the same time believing that any concession proposed would not be implemented. The inconsistent nature of the leadership's thinking on this issue is demonstrated by its willingness to use Györki as an intermediary, while at the same time rejecting any idea of entering into direct discussions with the government. The only way out of this impasse would have been for Bethlen to introduce concessions before the party returned to the parliament and that, as he made clear through his emissaries, was the one thing he would not do.

Bethlen also should be afforded some credit for breaking the boycott. He had erred badly in provoking the crisis and allowing it to escalate. He then, however, demonstrated his tactical brilliance by producing a series of threats and promises
sufficient to pick off some of the boycotters and add to the pressure on those who remained outside the parliament.

Overall though, as his comment to Zsitvay suggests, he knew he could achieve success simply by continuing to drive legislation through an even more compliant parliament, while the opposition could do nothing. Sooner or later the opposition had to return to the parliament ensuring Bethlen always held the upper hand. International pressure could perhaps have changed his tactics but that was never likely to occur when the boycott was apparently triggered by a dispute about a point of order. The boycott affected not the legitimacy of the government but the popularity of the parties engaged in the boycott. In this light the real failure was not the way the boycott was conducted but the inability of the opposition and in particular the MSZDP to avoid being involved in a boycott in the first place.

The broader question is, therefore, how did the MSZDP become caught up in such a predicament. To answer this question we need to consider two factors. First, the MSZDP’s misconception of what it could expect from operating as a normal parliamentary party.

Even in the most democratic of modern parliaments it is rare for the opposition to play much of a role in determining government policy. There was no reason to expect relations between the government and the MSZDP to be different. Yet, extraordinarily, in the debates on whether the party should engage in the elections the idea was presented that the parliamentary option would achieve real results. This idea drew sustenance from the fact that never before had the party enjoyed a parliamentary presence. Of course, the party did gain opportunities to exert an influence through cross-party meetings, one-to-one negotiations, points of order, the occasional petition considered by the relevant minister, recalls of parliament and speeches of MPs reported in the press the following day.\[^{135}\] Beyond this, however, the party could quite naturally achieve nothing of substance. The resulting

\[^{135}\] See for example OLK, 468, B/1, 1388. It is also worth noting that there was substantially more coverage of parliamentary speeches in serious newspapers of the time then can be found in either the Hungarian or the British press of today.
disillusionment, and demands for more radical solutions, was, in this respect, entirely predictable.

The MSZDP's political impotence also encouraged a growing band of internal party critics to argue that the parliamentary option was a failure. From this perspective the idea of direct action, the utilization of the masses, advocated by so many prominent socialists, became a more and more attractive proposition. The question, therefore, became how long the advocates of parliamentary politics, concentrated in the parliamentary party, could hold out against pressure for a change in tactics. Eventually, the party leadership was forced to compromise with its critics.

Burdened with expectations it could never fulfil, the parliamentary option was discarded in December 1924 under the flimsiest of pretexts. It gave way to the naïve belief that the realization of the party's aspirations must therefore lie outside the parliament. By the end of May 1925 it was clear that this had been a terrible mistake, but it was still the logical culmination of a line of argument that had begun in 1922 with the party's decision to participate in the 1922 elections.

The second reason for the MSZDP ending up in such a disastrous boycott, was its inability to develop a coherent and consistent response to Bethlen's policy making. Influenced by his advisers, in the same way that he had been in 1921, Bethlen was prepared to authorize and even encourage the interior ministry to take a hardline against socialist agitation and the MSZDP. He was, however, also prepared to promise reforms, but only if he regarded such promises as being necessary to strengthen his government's position. In April 1923, during the debates over the foreign loan, and in response to the 1924-1925 parliamentary boycott Bethlen did offer a more conciliatory approach to the MSZDP.

The MSZDP leadership was unable to formulate an effective response to Bethlen's tactics. At times an over-optimistic belief that Bethlen was finally prepared to introduce reforms, allowed Bethlen to exploit such hopes for his own political advantage. For much of the time, however, the MSZDP adopted an increasingly confrontational approach that encouraged the government to regard the party as a
threat to national unity. The inconsistent nature of the MSZDP’s tactics ensured that the party would be continuously outmanouvered by Bethlen.
Chapter 7 - Conclusion

This thesis lays out the process by which Bethlen reconstructed key elements of the pre-war political system. Central to this process was the creation of a new governing party constructed by the two Tiszas. By the summer of 1925 this new party had secured electoral victory, dominated parliament, intermeshed itself with the administration, was loyal to the government, had outmanoeuvred the opposition, and was dominated by a single individual - Bethlen.

This thesis, however, also seeks to determine whether Bethlen had a particular ideology which underpinned his policy making. Marxist historians argued that Bethlen’s ideology favoured either the recreation of the ancien regime or the creation of some form of ultra-authoritarian or even neo-fascist state. Such statements are, however, simplistic and ideologically motivated, and receive no support from the arguments presented in this thesis.

Most serious historians of the period have persistently doubted whether any ideology of Bethlen’s can be discerned. Gusztáv Gratz calls Bethlen a conservative but he also writes that Bethlen ‘did not work from doctrinaire convictions’.\(^1\) Macartney writes of ‘the almost unlimited breadth of the [Unified] Party’s own principles’. He claims that ‘in all its history, the party, (and, therefore, by extension its leader Bethlen), never committed itself to any principle except only that of being counter-revolutionary, and even that it interpreted with extreme elasticity’.\(^2\) Batkay writes that Bethlen’s ideology consisted only of a ‘vague platform’ from which the Unified Party’s ‘component groups could take whatever happened to suit their particular interests’.\(^3\) Romsics has tried to find some common principles, claiming that the party was united in seeing the monarchical question as unimportant and was

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\(^1\) Gratz also notes that Bethlen admired the 19th century reformer Istvan Széchenyi, who he declared was ‘neither liberal nor reactionary, but solely and exclusively Hungarian’. See Gratz, *Magyarország a két háború között*, p.127.

\(^2\) Macartney, *October 15th*, i, p.46-47.

\(^3\) Batkay, *Authoritarian Politics*, p.42.
opposed to bolshevism, but even he comes to the conclusion that ‘the party had no ideology’.4

These approaches, however, confuse the lack of a clearly defined ideology with the total absence of ideology. Andrew Janos is perhaps alone in seeking to offer a definition of Bethlen’s ideology. He writes that Bethlen believed in the ‘pragmatic etatism of the two Tiszas’. He defines this as a belief in ‘state power’, which would be used as ‘a means towards the achievement of a number of “higher” historical ends: material progress, national independence, and even democratic government’.5 Although Janos’s definition requires elaboration, it nevertheless provides two pointers towards a proper understanding of Bethlen’s ideology. First, it perceptively puts ‘pragmatism’ at the centre of Bethlen’s ideology. Secondly, it links Bethlen’s ideology to that of Kálmán and István Tisza.

The ideology of the two Tiszsas, as outlined in the introduction to this thesis, can be summarized as being designed to ensure party cohesion, incorporating different strands of political thinking, and opposing any proponents of radical change. This thesis argues that Bethlen promulgated a similar ideology to create and shape the Unified Party.6 Romsics remarks that the slogans Bethlen employed such as ‘Hungarian national democracy’, ‘Christian liberalism’, ‘gradual progress’, the ‘middle road’, the ‘golden way’ and ‘national unity’, were never given ‘an unambiguous definition’.7 Just as with the two Tiszas, however, such ambiguity was the means by which Bethlen held together the core elements needed to construct a new governing party.

There are a number of examples of the way Bethlen’s ideology appealed to different, and even to some extent opposing, interests. For example, incorporated into the Unified Party were what can be loosely termed agrarian interests. Among these

6 Gusztáv Gratz also draws the comparison between Bethlen’s party and the pre-1918 governing party, although he sees this as demonstrating that neither party had a fixed ideology [politiikai alapfelfogások]. See Gratz, Magyarország a két háború között, p.147.
7 Romsics, István Bethlen, p.181.
agrarians, who came together in the Smallholder party in 1920, were MPs who demanded rural reform (such as land reform), MPs who demanded a pro-agricultural economic policy, (demanding subsidies for agriculture and lower taxes for agricultural workers), and MPs who advocated ‘népies’ policies opposed to the socialism, cosmopolitanism and Judaism they regarded as prevalent in the cities and above all Budapest.⁸

Bethlen appealed to the agrarians by pronouncing his attachment to rural values, including leading agrarians such as Nagyatádi-Szabó in his cabinets, and authorizing some of the agrarians’ programme including limited land reform and agricultural credits. Bethlen’s ideology cannot, however, be described simply as ‘agrarian’.

The most vocal elements of the népies programme (Gömbös and his closest supporters) were driven out of the party. Bethlen also continued to cultivate links with business and commercial interests, ensured that representatives of industry and commerce occupied the post of minister of finance, continued to focus the economy on industrial development, and even sought to gain the support of the industrial proletariat through the funding of ‘Christian socialist’ organizations.

Bethlen’s ideology also sought to bridge the gap between the ultra-conservative and ultra-nationalist elements whose antagonism was rooted in traditional arguments over the 1867 ‘Ausgleich’ between the House of Habsburg and Hungary. This argument had resurfaced most clearly in the arguments between legitimists and free-electors, but it also had the potential to manifest itself in a clash between conservative resistance to social reform and the social radicalism implicit in nationalist thinking.

Bethlen’s solution was to use phrases that appealed to both conservatives and nationalists. On the controversial questions of the restoration of the king, for example, he called for a ‘national kingdom’. This was able, initially, to appeal even to extreme

elements on both sides. Indeed until Charles IV’s second coup attempt forced the
issue both Andrassy and Gömbös believed Bethlen held their view.

In the longer term Bethlen continued to seek to reconcile moderate
conservatives and nationalists. His call for ‘national unity’ appealed to conservatives
who regarded this as a rejection of radical reform on the grounds that it would benefit
only one element of society and not the entire nation. Thus the Smallholders, MSZDP
and right-radicals programmes could be rejected because they put sectional interests
above national unity. On the other hand nationalists could also feel comfortable with
Bethlen’s incessant emphasis on placing the nation above class and political instincts.
Bethlen, for example, compared his ideology to that of István Szechényi, who he
declared ‘was neither a democrat nor a reactionary…but solely and exclusively
Hungarian’.

Bethlen’s greatest success as regards accommodating different groups to his
ideology came, however, in the religious sphere. By resolutely insisting that the
national interest should supersede denominational interests, Bethlen was able to
effectively remove the long-standing division between Catholics and Protestants. The
very fact that this thesis has not needed to deal with the Catholic-Protestant divide,
demonstrates how successful Bethlen was in preventing such divisions threatening the
unity of his governing party. The only exception to this being the legitimist parties
unsuccessful attempt to play the ‘Catholic card’ in the 1922 elections. Only the Jews
remained effectively excluded from Bethlen’s unifying ideology, although Bethlen
was determined to ensure that this particular division was neither too obvious nor too
confrontational.

Bethlen’s ideology, therefore, incorporated elements of agrarian, urban,
conservative, nationalist, Catholic and Protestant thinking. The genuinely unifying
nature of Bethlen’s ideology is demonstrated by the by wide range of interests
apparent among Unified Party MPs in 1925. Following the resolution of the party

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9 Gratz, Magyarország a két háború között, p.127. Hungarian text is, ‘nem volt demokrta, sem
reakcionárus...hanem egyedül és kizárólag magyar’.
crisis in 1923, one could still find among the party’s MPs, one-time supporters of Gömbös’s right-radicalism, agrarians who had entered parliament in 1920 on a programme of rural reform, representatives of the leading industrial and commercial bodies, and MPs who had initially supported the programme of the old legitimist parties.

Like the pre-1918 governing party, ideological cohesion was also increased by the exclusion, or expulsion, from the party, of any elements that advocated radical reform, such as the socialists, the extreme legitimists, and the right-radical followers of Gömbös. Also each group within the party operated as a counter-balance and moderating influence on the other groups within the party.

Where Bethlen’s ideology moved beyond that of the two Tiszás was in the way it was underpinned by his ability to relentlessly focus on a particular objective. The two Tiszás had, occasionally, also been prepared to alter the party’s policies if they risked losing the support of too many of their supporters. Bethlen was, however, prepared to continuously compromise, alter his tactics, and even reverse his opinions, to ensure the Unified Party remained unified and in power.

Each chapter of the thesis demonstrates this focus in Bethlen’s policy making. He repeatedly altered his conception of how a Unified Party could be constructed, first attempting to build the new party while outside parliament, then making party unification his condition for assuming the premiership, and finally using his position as prime minister as leverage to create a new party. He also repeatedly changed his opinion of which factions should be incorporated into the new party. In early 1919 he sought to include all the conservative factions apart from the agrarians. In 1920 he sought to create the party by merging the two largest parties in the parliament. In 1921 he first sought to incorporate the moderates from both parties, then he sought to merge the legitimists with the conservative wing of the Smallholders. After the October coup, he again changed track and built the party around the Smallholders and some moderate legitimists.

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In the 1922 elections Bethlen again remained focused on his single overriding objective of ensuring the Unified Party stayed in power. It is impossible to pick out any other guiding principle that shaped the electoral franchise or the way in which he conducted these elections. He justified his right to determine a new franchise by the use of a constitutional committee but his solution lacked any constitutional precedent. He privately admitted that the 1918 franchise was too restrictive, but it is difficult to describe his own franchise as progressive. Furthermore his franchise contained two voting systems (list voting and single-member constituencies) and two means of casting a ballot (open voting in rural areas, the secret ballot in the cities). There was also no single principle determining who should vote, how they should vote, or how far the administration should intervene in the elections: political pressure, moral judgements, historical precedent and electoral calculation all had a share in determining who was enfranchised.

During the 1922-1923 party crisis Bethlen’s tactics also varied according to his determination of how best to maintain the unity and power of the party. As regards the right-radicals, he first tolerated their criticisms and defended the excesses of their supporters. Then, he appeared willing to find a compromise solution to alleviate their dissatisfaction, and finally, only when he was sure of success, did he act against them, driving them out of the party and cracking down on them outside the parliament.

In dealing with the agrarian faction Bethlen actually altered party policy to maintain party unity. He (temporarily) shelved plans for administrative reform and the restoration of the upper house, and briefly abandoned his goal of fiscal rectitude by releasing a veritable flood of agricultural credits. Most strikingly, on the question of the land reform, he executed a complete about-turn. His opposition to land redistribution is well documented. Nevertheless, to ensure that he had the agrarians support while he crushed the right radicals, he gave his full support to a further extension of the land reform.

The same focus on strengthening the position of the Unified Party can be seen in Bethlen’s attempt to expand the party organization. The whole attempt was
constrained by being badly thought through and badly executed. Nevertheless, so long as Bethlen regarded the expansion of the party organization as essential the process moved forward, in spite of resistance from the administration and party MPs. When, however, Bethlen concluded that the MSZDP no longer threatened to turn the electorate against the Unified Party, that the right-radicals could possibly turn an invigorated party organization against the government, and that the government would be better served by relying on more malleable institutions such as local assemblies, the whole process was quietly, but swiftly, abandoned.

The best example of Bethlen’s ability to focus on his political objective came in his dealings with the MSZDP. The detailed agreement he made with the MSZDP in December 1921 meant that Bethlen became the first Hungarian prime minister to try to find a real accommodation with the socialist movement. This was not, however, an indication of any progressive sentiment on Bethlen’s part. He was primarily motivated by government officials, such as Zoltán Bencs, who argued that such a move would be in the nation’s and the government’s interest. Bethlen also needed to ensure that the MSZDP appeared to operate as a normal political party, participated in the parliamentary elections, and added to the legitimacy of the polity he was constructing. While there was an opportunity to secure a lasting accommodation with the MSZDP, this appears not to have entered into Bethlen’s calculations.

The extent to which the agreement was in essence no more than a bold, political tactic is demonstrated by Bethlen’s refusal to apply some of the promises he had made in the agreement, and by his subsequent authorization of a real crackdown on the MSZDP’s activities from the summer of 1922 onwards. Even then Bethlen was still prepared to offer the MSZDP further packages of reforms, but each time there was an underlying reason for such offers; to ensure the swift passage of the enabling legislation for the foreign loan, and the attempt to end the MSZDP’s, and the liberal parties’ boycott of parliament.

Bethlen’s relationship with the socialists was also affected by the MSZDP leadership’s extraordinary incompetence, which provided him with the opportunity to
score maximum political advantage. The MSZDP’s internal divisions and increasing radicalism after 1922 enabled Bethlen, and his advisers, to portray the socialist movement as a real threat to national stability. The primary failing of the MSZDP was, however, that it persistently regarded Bethlen as either a sympathetic reformist or an absolutely untrustworthy reactionary. Such a one-dimensional approach entirely misunderstood Bethlen’s motivations. His relations with the MSZDP, as in all his policy making, were determined solely by a calculation of what was in his government’s and his party’s interest.

This thesis, therefore, argues that Bethlen’s constructed an ideology that in large part replicated the ideology of the two Tiszas. He sought to appeal to the different currents of political thinking. He also sought to hold together those groups he found acceptable and whose support he needed to create a moderate, centrist, governing party. The central characteristic of Bethlen’s ideology was, however, his ability to focus on specific political objectives and do whatever was necessary to ensure they were achieved. This goes beyond Andrew Janos’s claim that Bethlen’s ‘pragmatic etatism’ affected his eventual objectives. Bethlen’s ‘pragmatism’ had implications for every aspect of his political programme and is apparent in each area of his policy making considered in this thesis.
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