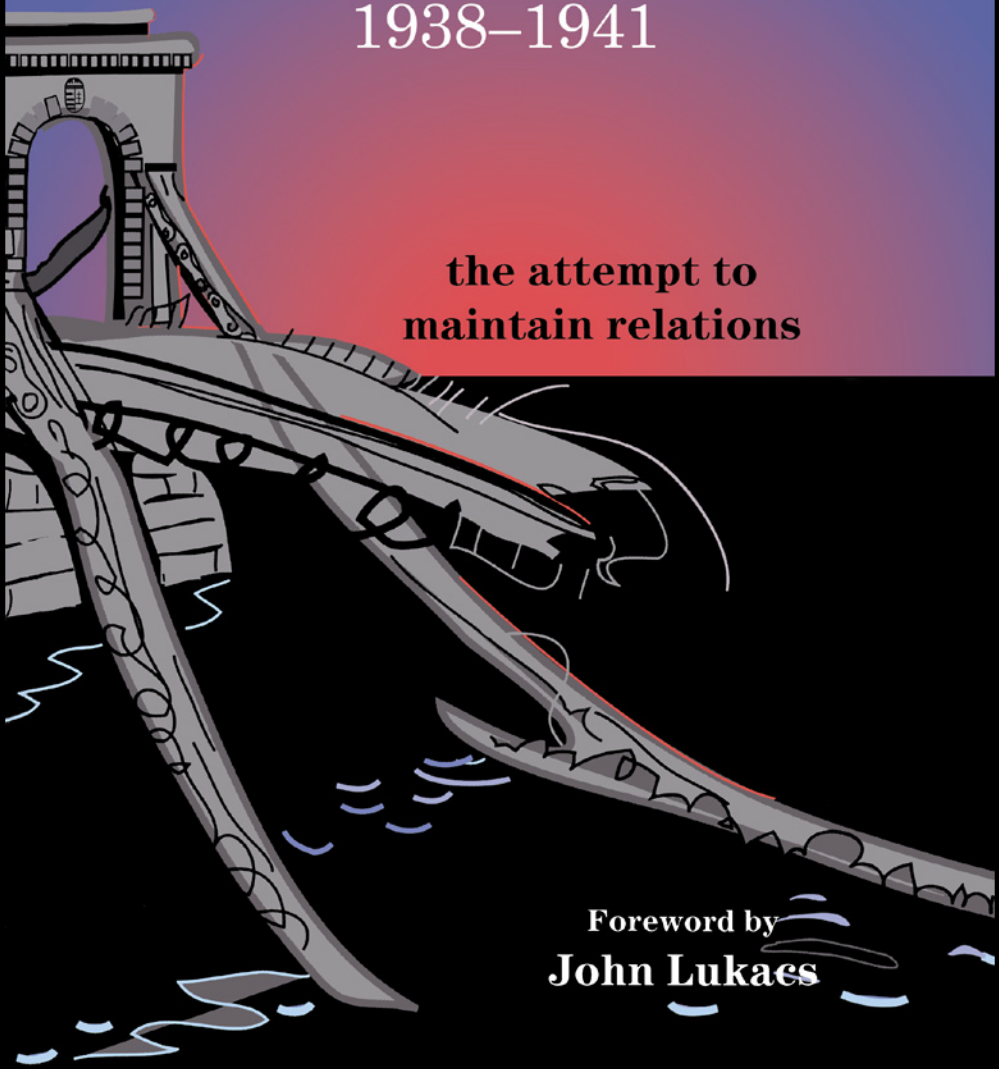
András D Bán

HUNGARIAN-BRITISH DIPLOMACY 1938–1941

the attempt to maintain relations



Foreword by
John Lukacs

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1938–1941

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The Attempt to Maintain Relations

András Bán
Translation by Tim Wilkinson
Foreword by John Lukacs

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Contents

'an Englishman has no ulterior motives, does not exploit his friends, and does not stab his enemies in the back. He has no word for Schadenfreude, machismo or flânerie; he is obliging, straight dealing, courteous. No one of us can make him out, however. He is impermeable to the continental way of thinking.'

(László Cs. Szabó, *Crossing to Dover*)

Introduction

John Lukacs

The purpose of this Introduction is to advise readers of this book about three of its important features: of the general, and then of the specific, importance of its topic, and of the unusual scope and quality of its author's accomplishment.

The three years from 1938 to 1941 were the most critical ones in the long, though fragmentary, history of British-Hungarian relations. But they were also the most critical years in the history of Europe, indeed of Western civilization, during the twentieth century. Few people recognized then, and not very many recognize even now, how close Hitler and his Great German Reich had come to winning the Second World War–with incalculable consequences, perhaps needless to say. Or perhaps not so needless at all: because the consequences of Hitler's victory then would have been immeasurably greater, more profound, more disastrous and more enduring than a German victory in the West in 1914 or 1918, or than a (necessarily ephemeral) Russian victory during the so-called Cold War. And during the three years 1938–1941 there was only one power that stood athwart Hitler's astonishing march. This was Britain; and within Britain Winston Churchill. Eventually Ghurchill and Britain would not be *the* winners of the Second World War: but he was the man who did not lose it. It is remarkable how few people saw this at that time (and not many people do even now). In his original Introduction, written in Hungarian for Hungarians, András Bán quoted Johan Huizinga: 'A historian must constantly put himself at a point in the past at which the known factors still seem to permit different outcomes. If he speaks of Salamis, it must be as if the Persians might still win.' Bán added: 'lf a historian wishes to avoid the many slips and traps that will arise in the course of his

study, he cannot take the "end result" as his point of departure. He must attempt to adhere to Huizinga's dictum.'

Remarkable is this young (and, alas, prematurely deceased) Hungarian historian's knowledge and understanding of British people and of the Britain of that period. In 1938 and thereafter Britain no longer had human and material and military resources comparable to those of the British Empire half a century before. Yet the confidence and steadiness of the English public and of the men of the Foreign Office astonish us in retrospect. They appear in the language of their communications to the representatives of a small faraway country, in the middle of a German-ruled Europe. Their statements illustrate many things: their understanding of that country's geographical situation and of its contraints (an understanding that amounts to careful consideration rather than to outright sympathy) and their admonitions, of course always subordinated to what these officials saw as Britain's principal interests. Their confidence is noteworthy. While for us the prospect of a British victory and British considerations for a restoration of a European order in 1940–41 seem exaggerated, if not altogether shortsighted, this was not how it seemed to these British officials, indeed to the British public by and large then. In sum, the material reflecting British policy in 1938–41 alone makes this book worth reading for specialists in British diplomatic history.

And now to its specific topic: Hungarian-British relations during those, so very critical, years. From 1920 to 1938 the principal aim of Hungarian foreign policy was 'revisionist': to regain (at least some of) the lands that Hungary lost to its surrounding neighbours in 1919–20, specifically though the Treaty of Trianon, lands that for many centuries had belonged to Hungary, and where millions of Hungarians still lived. Hungary could count on no serious support for this from foreign powers, except here and there from Mussolini's Italy. British opinion was relatively well disposed towards Hungary in the 1920s and 1930s but this had no practical or political weight or significance at that time.

Then, in 1938, Hitler's Germany occupied annexed Austria–and soon after that, Czechoslovakia. The might and the repute and the influence of the German Reich were now enormous; and that Reich had become a close neighbour, leaning on Hungary. There were Hungarian patriots who recognized that this was a situation entirely new. The main problem was no longer how to reclaim and regain this or that from Hungary's smaller neighbour states; it was to preserve the

very independence of Hungary. It is necessary to record that these men were a minority. The majority of Hungarians, and of their governing class, did not quite see things in that way. It was not only that the prospect of overturning the Treaty of Trianon, of recovering at least some of the territories lost in 1918–20, remained their main preoccupation. There was also their inclination to follow, or even to admire, the new Germany, including its ideology of National Socialism. An example of this was the result of the May 1939 election in Hungary (the first with an uninhibited and secret ballot) when outright National Socialist parties gained nearly one-fourth of all votes, and even more in the formerly Socialist working-class districts of Budapest. Against them stood diverse elements of the Hungarian people and society, ranging from Jews, Liberals, the remnants of Social Democrats, to committed conservatives, men close to the Regent Horthy, the remaining aristocracy, other men here and there within the top layers of the government, very much so in the case of the Foreign Ministry, and also the (since February 1939) Prime Minister Count Pál Teleki. These men knew that their main duty from now on was to preserve the–relative–independence and sovereignty of Hungary. They knew, too, that they had to struggle not only against German power but also against waves of domestic public opinion and popular sentiment.

They also recognized, surely at the latest by 1939, that the only counterweight against Hitler's domination of Europe was Great Britain. It is for this reason that the history of the relationship of Hungary with Great Britain, until December 1941, is especially telling and interesting.

Much, though not all, of this existed on the level of governmental, that is, diplomatic, relations. Their record, precisely and carefully presented in this book, is significant enough. We must keep in mind that this functioned on a high, and in many ways confidential, level. The staff of the Hungarian Foreign Ministry was conservative, old-fashioned, semi-aristocratic–not typical of the majority of the Hungarian official bureaucracy. A newer, populist, nationalist (as distinct from patriotic) and, by and large, Germanophile presence in the Foreign Ministry existed only here and there. Contemplating this years later we have the sense and the climate of a vanished world–which should deserve at least some of our respect. Of course it was not quite as simple as that. The minister of Hungary in Britain, György Barcza, was a committed Anglophile and Germanophobe; his Prime Minister Teleki shared many, though by no means all, of Barcza's

convictions and views. Teleki understood, even more profoundly than Barcza, the constraints of Hungary's situation; and also the condition that, even in the best of instances, Hungary could not expect much from Britain or, indeed, from the English-speaking powers. On the night of 2–3 April 1941 Teleki shot himself. This was a desperate act to demonstrate his and his nation's honour, a silent protest against accepting Hitler's demand that Hungary join in his invasion of Yugoslavia (a state with which Hungary had signed an accord of 'eternal friendship' but a few months before).

Churchill understood this. He had a sympathy for Hungary and an extraordinary knowledge of its history, going back many years. In April 1941, despite Hungary joining with Germany by invading what was left of Yugoslavia, Churchill chose not to declare war on Hungary but only to terminate diplomatic relations. (The British declaration of war, summarily requested by Stalin, came only in December 1941.)

From May 1938 to February 1942 the course of the Hungarian ship of state was largely set by three prime ministers: Imrédy, Teleki and Bárdossy. One of the most valuable portions of this book is Bán's special description and analysis of these three prime ministers, including their inclinations but also the dualities of their characters. This alone amounts to a departure from the habitual practices of mundane diplomatic history.

To another unique feature of this book I must now turn. There is a difference between the history of diplomatic and the history of international relations. The former, largely restricted to the relations and communications of courts to courts, of governments to other governments, had its origins in the city-states of fifteenth-century Italy, when the rulers of Venice, Florence, Genoa, Milan, Rome, etc., established, for the first time, permanent missions (legations, embassies) in each other's courts. Such permanent representations then spread across Europe after the Thirty Years' War. The primary sources of diplomatic history were, accordingly, ambassadorial reports. This remained largely so as late as the early twentieth century. Yet international, as distinct from diplomatic, history is something else. It involves more than relations through the instruments and institutions of governmental foreign policy. (The very word 'international' first appeared in English as late as around 1800; in Hungarian not before 1854.) At that time international relations, including travel, trade and finance, affected only a tiny fraction of peoples. A Hungarian working

man or peasant was not likely to have ever seen an Englishman, while Englishmen had but very few notions or images of Hungarians. But then came a change. With the spread of literacy, with newspapers, photography, travel, still and moving pictures, etc., nations began to build up images of other nations. These images were often superficial, they could be manipulated, but their existence was real, and they affected the very policies of respective governments.

The French historian Pierre Renouvin was one of the first to comprehend and represent the difference between diplomatic history and the broader (and sometimes deeper) scope of a history of international relations. One generation later another French historian, René Rémond, exemplified this in two volumes of his *Les Etats-Unis devant l'opinion française 1815–1852* (1962), including research on and description of matters such as emigration, travel, foreign trade, translation and reception of literary works, the evolution of the press, of the reading public, etc., etc. Thus the breadth (and sometimes the depth) of matters involving international relations renders the historian's work more difficult: his main problem is no longer that of the relative rarity but that of a veritable profusion of sources.

This is what this excellent young Hungarian historian, András Bán (1962–2001) achieved in this book. In addition to the diplomatic and governmental records, his studies and reconstruction of relations of trade, of travel, of the press, of literary and artistic pro ductions, of translations and of the influences of émigrés, etc.–all of these more or less reciprocal–are included in this work. This is unusual and, in one sense, novel and path-breaking. It illustrates the great maxim of Jacob Burckhardt, who said that history really has no 'method' of its own, save for the overall condition: *Bisogna saper leggere*–one must know how to read. We might add: how to write. These are absolute conditions of a craft that Bán has observed and fulfilled. (Independent from the merits of this English translation, the style of Bán's writing alone demonstrates a wide literary culture–alas, not too frequent among professional historians.) And then, added to his mastery of a very wide and large extent of many kinds of sources there is his understanding that the relations of entire nations–especially before and during the Second World War–are not only influenced but at times even governed by images of each other that involve more than superficial impressions or political preferences; they involve sympathies and antipathies that are even more cultural than political. Such were, for

instance, Anglophilia or Anglophobia, or Germanophilia and Germanophobia, and not only in Hungary but in very many instances throughout Europe and across the world. It is my opinion that this is but one element of the outstanding qualities of Bán's accomplishment. It may merit the designation of this book as a minor classic.

History of the English Edition

This English edition of Bán's work came about through unusual circumstances. I met Bán in 1998 shortly before the original Hungarian edition of the book appeared in Budapest. Upon first reading, it became apparent to me that its subject, scholarship and impartiality (not always the hallmark of Hungarian historians), and its quite extraordinary account of previously little-known details of British history, warranted its publication in English. I drafted a letter to the author encouraging him to pursue this, but somehow never sent it (I was too busy with my architectural practice). Then came news that Bán was terminally ill; he died tragically young in September 2001.

Still believing in the considerable value of this work, I decided to undertake the publication in England without having had any experience. Seeking advice eventually overcame lack of experience. It was also evident that a work in such a specialized area could only be published with the help of private funding.

The first breakthrough came in the reply from Professor John Lukacs, who not only encouraged the enterprise but also promised to write a substantial introduction as well as editing the English. Without his continuous and generous support, the book would not have reached the printers.

The most difficult part of aiding the translation was locating the original English (and German) sources, which Bán had translated for the Hungarian text. There were well over one hundred quotes from widely differing sources. My wife, Ildikó Vaci, undertook the task. Bán's archive material provided a few sources. The rest she found at the Public Record Office, the British Library, BL Newspapers, the German Historical Institute, Westminster Reference Library, the Guildhall Library, University College Library and the BBC Written

Archives. Maciej Siekierski at the Hoover Institution was particularly helpful. My wife's other important contribution was the line-by-line check of the draft translation against the Hungarian original.

Professor George Schöpflin (University College London), Dr István Hont (Fellow of King's College, Cambridge), Professor Robert Evans (Modern History, Oxford), and Dr Peter Sherwood (University College London) all gave valuable advice. Mátyás Sárközi continued his role of *spiritus movens*. Bán's parents took a sensitive interest and lent his archive material.

Part of the funding came from several private donations. Steven Molnar kindly designed the evocative cover illustration of the Chain Bridge across the River Danube, designed and built by Scottish engineers and blown up by the Germans in 1945. Sian Mills was a very sympathetic and professional editor at Frank Cass Publishers.

Bán was ideally suited to research and write this work. His knowledge of Hungarian, English, Russian and Slovak helped him greatly. In 1994 he edited, introduced and annotated György Barcza's (the Hungarian minister in London during the critical period) *Diplomatic Memoirs;* in 1996 he compiled *Pax Britannica,* the British Foreign Office Papers on Central Europe 1942–43. His own acknowledgements mention the valuable periods of research time he spent at the Public Record Office (London) and the Hoover Institution. It is sad to reflect that his premature death deprives us of other, very valuable, works from his pen.

Sándor Vaci
July 2003, London

Chronology

1938
12 March: Hitler's Reich annexes Austria.
Summer: Chamberlain's government tries to appease Germany.

August–September: Sudeten German crisis. Hitler threatens to invade Czechoslovakia.

30 September: Munich Settlement.

1938
Germany becomes Hungary's neighbour. First anti-Jewish legislation.

May: Regent Horthy appoints Imrédy as Prime Minister.

August: Horthy and Imrédy visit Hitler.
September: Imrédy chooses to embark on pro-German course.

2 November: First Vienna Award. Germany and Italy restore a strip of Magyar-inhabited Slovak territory to Hungary.
November–December: Political crisis around Imrédy.

1939

15 March: Hitler marches into Prague.

April: Britain and France guarantee Poland, Romania, Greece.

23 August: German–Russian Non-Aggression Pact; secret division of Northeastern Europe.
1 September: Churchill enters British government.
3 September: Britain and France declare war against Germany.
September: Germany conquers Poland. Russia enters and occupies Eastern Poland.
30 September–12 March 1940: Winter war between Russia and Finland.

1940
April: Germany invades and conquers Denmark; invades and eventually conquers Norway.
10 May: Germany invades Western Europe.
Churchill Prime Minister.

1939
February: Teleki appointed Prime Minister
16 March: Hungary occupies and annexes the Carpatho-Ukraine, part of former Czechoslovakia, bordering Poland.

May: Large right-wing gain in Hungarian elections, including nearly 25 per cent of votes for Arrow Cross.

Second, more stringent, anti-Jewish legislation.

September: Teleki reluctant to allow German troops to cross Hungary on their way to Poland. Hungary accepts and harbours tens of thousands of Polish refugees.

1940

May–June: Dunkirk. Britain fights on.
10 June: Mussolini's Italy enters war.
June: Collapse of France. Russia takes Bessarabia and N. Bukovina from Romania. Romania switches to German side.

August–September: Battle of Britain.
September: Britain uninvaded. Tripartite Pact: Germany, Italy and Japan.
October: Italy invades Greece.

November: Molotov's visit to Berlin a failure.
End of year: American Lend-Lease. US 'Arsenal of Democracy'.

1941
1 March: German troops enter Bulgaria.
25 March: Yugoslav ministers sign Tripartite Pact; revolution in Belgrade disavows them.

July: Crisis with Romania.
August: Second Vienna Award. Germany and Italy award Northern Transylvania to Hungary. Special rights given to German minority in Hungary.
October: First German troops in Hungary (mostly in transit to Romania).
November: Hungary joins Tripartite Pact.

December: Hungarian–Yugoslav 'Eternal Friendship' Treaty.

1941

27 March: Hitler writes to Horthy that he will attack Yugoslavia.
2 April: Prime Minister Teleki kills himself.
2–3 April: German troops stream into Hungary on their way to Yugoslavia. Bárdossy appointed Prime Minister. Britain breaks diplomatic relations with Hungary.

6 April: Germany invades Yugoslavia and Greece.
April: Collapse of Yugoslav and Greek armies. British evacuate Greece.
May: Rudolf Hess flies to England. Americans land in Greenland and Iceland.
End of May: Germans wrest Crete from British.
22 June: Germany invades Soviet Union. Churchill offers unconditional alliance to the latter.

10 April: Hungarian troops enter Yugoslavia.

27 June: Hungary declares war against Russia. Third anti-Jewish legislation.

July–December: German armies thrust deep into Russia.
5 December: Britain declares war on Hungary, Romania, Finland.
8 December: Germans halted before Moscow.
USA enters war; Pearl Harbor.

11 December: Bárdossy declares war against the USA.

Acknowledgements

When the idea of writing this book occurred to me, a few years ago, I knew that I would be attempting a formidable task. The project both fascinated and excited me. As the fruit of my researches in London, I had assembled a large body of documentation about Anglo-Hungarian relations between 1938 and 1941. I wanted to write a work on the history of diplomacy, but not one in the 'traditional' manner. I was concerned to put what I had to say in a way that would make it enjoyable not just for historians but also for a wider public, to lay before the reader a good deal more than just a pile of diplomatic reports. I tried to interpret, to 'unravel', what was left unsaid behind and between the lines of diplomats' documents, what a given adjective–or perhaps its absence–might cover. Besides that, I took special care to write about not just what the main players of that era had thought and written, and when, but also *how and why*. And not just them, for I also attempted to trace what the English and Hungarians thought about each other. I strove to ascertain sympathies and antipathies. This can sometimes reveal more about an era than any amount of diplomatic reports. It was for the same reason that I ventured to sketch–only in outline, of course–the character of several political figures.

I was not left to myself while engaged on my work. My first debt of thanks is owed to the Soros Foundation for the grant that enabled me to spend several months on my researches at Britain's Public Record Office during 1994 and 1996.1 am also grateful to the US-Hungarian Fulbright Committee for making it possible for me to spend almost five months in the archives of the Hoover Institution, California.

It was Professor John Lukacs who first drew my attention to the great importance of Anglo-Hungarian diplomatic and international relations between 1938 and 1941, and he was also the one who gave

me the greatest encouragement to tackle the subject. He supported me and helped me out with expert advice even at times when I all but despaired of being able to finish the book as it now stands. I had multiple opportunities to consult him, whether in Budapest or London or even Dover. I cannot thank him enough for that fatherly support, for without it this book would never have seen the light of day. I am also grateful to Professor Ignác Romsics, who has kept a close eye on my professional career since 1985. He supervised my research work, motivating me with fine words and arguments to complete the study. Whatever he said was inspired by the broader knowledge of a senior, more experienced colleague and, I may say, the benign intentions of a friend. I could always depend on him.

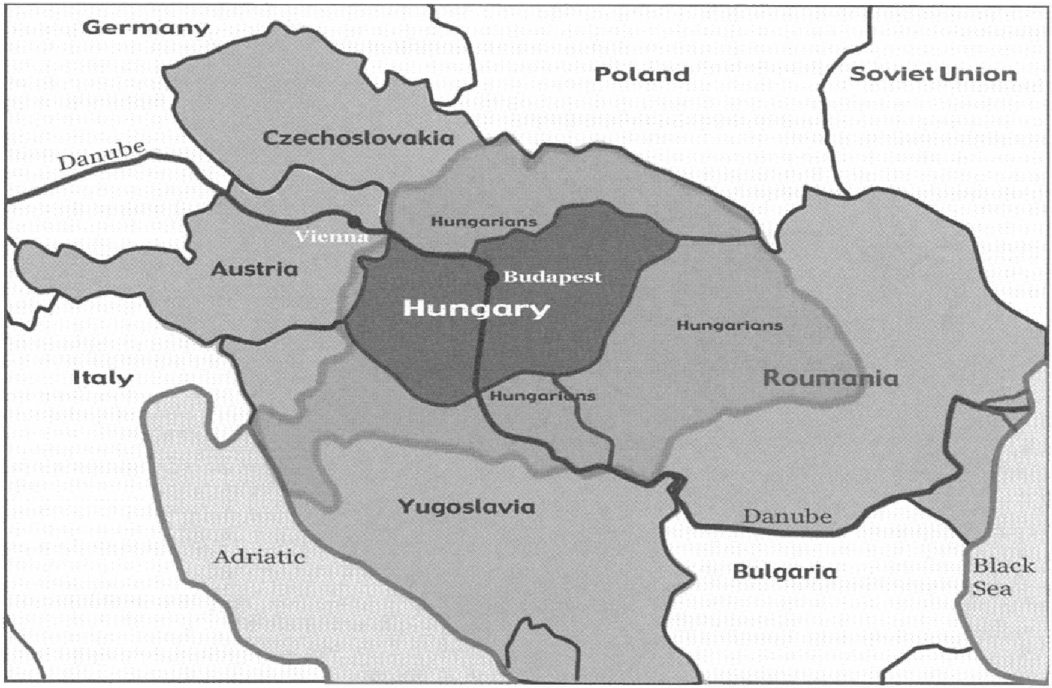
I should also record my great affection for Mátyás Sárközi, with whom I spent many hours conversing about my work both in the canteen at the BBC World Service in Bush House and at his Hampstead home. Few of my acquaintances are so familiar as he with the English way of thinking and with the history of the Hungarian community in Britain, both of old and of the present day, and even fewer can talk as entertainingly. His sparkling humour and kindness were often of direct assistance to me in negotiating the difficulties of writing. Nor can I omit mention of the help given by Professor Lóránt Czigány. He contributed much to polishing my manuscript by scrupulously reading through a draft and tactfully guiding me towards more elegant and precise formulations of what I was attempting to say.

Finally, I would like to thank all those friends, colleagues and acquaintances in London and Budapest who assisted me, however indirectly, in bringing this work to completion. Not least among them are my parents and, above all, my sister, who awaited this with such eager anticipation. The book is also dedicated to them.

András D.Bán

Budapest, 1 March 1998

Austro–Hungarian Monarchy at the Beginning of the First World War



Post–Trianon Treaty (1920): Hungary, its Neighbours and Ethnic Diversity (pre-First World War Hungary overlaid) ©S Vaci

Hungary: Territorial Revisions and Neighbours 1941