

**Bethlen István emlékirata 1944. Sajtó alá rendezte és a jegyzeteket írta
Romsics Ignác, bevezette Bolza Ilona és Romsics Ignác**
(Budapest, Zrínyi Katonai Kiadó 1988, 175 pp., 49,00 Ft.)

In 1985 there appeared, as volume 27 of the *Studia Hungarica* series published by the Ungarisches Institut München, a slender bilingual volume: Count István Bethlen, *Hungarian Politics During World War Two. Treatise and Indictment*, edited by Countess Ilona Bolza. It contains a facsimile reproduction of Bethlen's handwritten Hungarian memorandum, its English translation by Dr. Victor de Stankovich, and a short essay by Bolza, entitled "Count István Bethlen. A Former Prime Minister in Hiding (1940)" in English (pp. 1–7), and "A bujdosó gróf Bethlen István (1944)," in Hungarian (pp. 38–44). The latter version is probably the original.

The book under review contains the transcribed text of the memorandum (pp. 95–149), an essay by Romsics on the political career of Bethlen (pp. 5–70) and an enlarged version of the reminiscences of Ilona Bolza (pp. 71–93). Explanatory notes prepared by Romsics and an index complete the volume.

István Bethlen (1874–1947) was one of the protagonists of the so-called Horthy-era, a narrow time-span wedged between the twin tragedies of the two World Wars. Prime Minister from 1921 to 1931, he was the chief architect of the „consolidation” of Hungarian political life and remained a most influential figure in Parliament where he served first as a deputy, later as member of the Upper House. He was closely associated with the Regent to whom, to the end, he had direct access. Because of the anti-German stance he had taken, in the summer of 1944 he had to go into hiding, and from the end of July to early October he found asylum on the estate of the Bolza family. The Countess Ilona Bolza, who had good relations with Horthy, acted as a go-between for him and Bethlen, and to her was given for safe-keeping the manuscript of the memorandum: "A magyar politika a második világháborúban. Politikai tanulmány vagy vádirat."

Although the memorandum throws no new light on the events it describes, it makes for fascinating reading because it shows how this wise and thoroughly professional politician viewed them. I find it particularly interesting that – as many others, less well informed – he too stood baffled by the political *salto mortale* (as Bethlen puts it) of Imrédy, a competent and rather dreary banker, who suddenly changed into the champion and *particeps criminis* of the extreme Right Wing. I also loved his icy comment on Kálmán Darányi (Prime Minister 1936–1938) whom he describes as a "patriotic, conscientious" man, but hesitant and undecided, plagued by a heightened inferiority complex, rooted in a "correct self-assessment". [p. 130... "Minderwertigkeitsgefühl", amely a helyes önismeretéből származott".] Bethlen is eminently objective, and takes no advantage of hindsight. This is particularly noticeable in his attitude towards the Germans; he does not condemn the foreign policy of Gömbös (Prime Minister 1932–1936) based on alliance with Italy and Germany. (It is little known that the term "axis", generally used in connection with the Mussolini–Hitler alliance, was coined by Gömbös.) This is all the more interesting because, just as Teleki, so Bethlen was also convinced that Germany could not win the war. The point that Teleki had something of a boy-scout in him is well taken, and one stands amazed at noting that the two men shared the unrealistic view that Great Britain or the United States would in any way help Hungary.

Bolza's reminiscences are moving and recall a period when similar cloak-and-dapper adventures were part of the daily lives of many. Romsics' essay is a sober, clear-headed presentation of Bethlen's political career beginning with 1901. He is the author of a fine book dealing with Bethlen's earlier years [*Gróf Bethlen István politikai pályája 1901–1921*. (Budapest, Magvető, 1987)] and there is reason to hope that this essay heralds the publication of another detailed study dealing with the post-1921 period. The notes provided by Romsics to the memorandum and also to Bolza's reminiscences are helpful. One misses an exact reference to the original publication and there are some misprints. To mention but two, the name of Héjjas Iván is correctly given in the index, but the text has István. Another typographical error is quite dangerous. It does make a big difference whether in July 1931 the government was unable or obliged to close the banks; on p. 60 *képtelen* should read *kénytelen*.

It is pleasing to note that Hungarian historians may now write about the interwar years with no obligation to decry just about everything that happened unless it was initiated by socialists or communists. We are grateful to Ilona Bolza for her courage and generosity in saving and making public the memorandum. We are indebted to Ignác Romsics for its highly professional presentation.