

The voice of professional diplomacy: Joshua Butler Wright in Hungary, 1927–1930

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

After Theodore Brentano's long tenure (1922–1927), a new American minister arrived in Hungary, who in many ways was a very different breed from his predecessor. Joshua Butler Wright was a career diplomat and, as it turned out, the only such American minister in Hungary in the interwar years, which meant a somewhat different approach to the job. Many in Hungary also interpreted the change as a positive sign as to the country's greater importance for Washington. However, this was not to be. Butler Wright's three years in Budapest did not bring any fundamental changes in the relationship between the two countries, and Hungary's importance, or the lack thereof, to the United States remained as before: as long as there was a politically stable government in Hungary and it did not cause diplomatic headaches to Washington, the American State Department was satisfied with reading about the political and economic situation in Hungary. Therefore, any Hungarian hopes or expectations that the United States might help in the revision of the Treaty of Trianon were frustrated.

KEYWORDS

American–Hungarian relations, Treaty of Trianon, 1920s

INTRODUCTION: HUNGARY IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 1920S

After the trying and turbulent years of the immediate postwar years, by the mid-1920s Hungary found itself on a relatively even keel. Revolution, counterrevolution, a punishing peace treaty,

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and economic and financial strain were in store after World War I. With the ascendance of István Bethlen as prime minister and his pragmatic policies, Hungary began to gradually emerge from the profound decline it had experienced. Hungary gained membership in the League of Nations, which step made the country politically accepted in Europe, and in 1924 the successful League-orchestrated financial reconstruction of Hungary began. By the end of the program, in 1926, Hungary was in a much better financial and economic shape than a few years earlier, its political relations in the world had become more advantageous, partly because Bethlen maintained a firm control over the fervently revisionist sentiment among Hungarians. Hungary had good relations with Great Britain and the United States. The first country was perhaps the most important force within the League of Nations, while the latter was frequently regarded as a potential savior of Hungary. Therefore, the American ministers were accorded a distinctive status when serving in Budapest.¹

The second American minister, Joshua Butler Wright, arrived in Hungary in 1927, and during his tenure, he observed the most pivotal years of interwar Hungary. His work is largely unknown in the field of Hungarian historiography. This article introduces his work and the circumstances under which he performed his ministership. His tenure in this country is illustrative of both the turbulence of Hungary's position in Europe and the elevated yet implausible expectations held by Hungarians regarding the assistance the United States might provide. The fact that Butler Wright was a former diplomat only raised hopes that were not to be fulfilled. The article, mainly relying on primary sources such as governmental papers or diary entries, but also using contemporary newspapers, provides a comprehensive picture of Butler Wright's time and activities in Hungary.

SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF BUTLER WRIGHT

Joshua Butler Wright was born a few miles north of Manhattan at Irving-on-the-Hudson, or Irvington, New York, in 1877, but a decade later the family moved to New Jersey. His education included both public and private phases. After the initial years at Morristown public schools, he switched to Lawrenceville School at the age of thirteen, a prestigious preparatory institution, which meant a path to Princeton University, where he graduated with a science degree in 1899. First, he imagined his future in finances and, accordingly, moved to New York City. Over the following six-year period, he dedicated his energies to the operation of a stock exchange firm. He soon became disillusioned, however, and since burdened also with a troubled marriage, he decided on a career change. After a short though coveted experience in ranching in Wyoming, he entered the Diplomatic Service in 1909. His first appointment took him to Honduras, where he was able to observe firsthand the impact of revolutionary and civil wars in Latin America. After a brief period of residency in Belgium, he was sent to Brazil for two years, but in 1916 his orders called him as embassy counselor to Petrograd, Russia. The soon unfolding revolutions and their aftermath obviously left a deep impression on him, and reinforced his conviction in

¹For the most burning questions of the era in Hungary in English see, [Macartney \(1937\)](#), [Major \(1974\)](#), [Romsics \(1995, 2002\)](#).

the superiority of American political and cultural institutions. Only a few days after the Bolsheviks took power, Butler Wright assessed that the “situation now bids fair to be one which will overshadow any previous one in history,” and in many ways he was right.² After World War I he started to move up on the career ladder. First, he was third then full assistant secretary of state, which was followed by a string of ministerial posts: Budapest, Montevideo, Prague, and Havana, where he died in December 1939. He married Harriet Rodman Southerland in 1916, and had two daughters from that marriage: Mary and Edith.³

Butler Wright was a prominent figure in the formation of the American diplomatic service. While he was third assistant secretary of state, for example, he played an instrumental role in working out the details of the Rogers Act, which became law in May 1924.⁴ This piece of legislation sought to reform the diplomatic service of the United States by making it more professional and democratic. Its foundation was competitive examination and merit promotion. However, as any reforms, the Rogers Act suffered from flaws, and political nominees have remained a regular feature of the American diplomatic service, which does not mean that political appointees did not serve well when they were chiefs of mission.⁵ Butler Wright was of the firm opinion that an already good Foreign Service would become only better by implementing the ideas of the Rogers Act. Soon enough, he was the subject to the Act himself.

APPOINTMENT

After two and a half years of being assistant secretary of state, “Mr. Kellogg’s suave and able assistant,” who was mainly responsible for administering the personnel questions of the diplomatic service, was awaited by the field.⁶ Butler Wright was appointed as minister to Hungary in February 1927, and reached his designated service area in mid-June. Hungarians wished to see a change in American foreign policy concerning their country. They hoped that closer cooperation might mean a more active American participation in the overhaul of the Trianon Treaty. Following the conclusion of Brentano’s tenure, which was marked by his status as a political appointee, the appointment of a professional diplomat to represent the United States in Hungary was interpreted as a reflection of the growing significance of Hungary. The argument was put forth that the occurrence of such a change could not be attributed to mere chance. Rather, it was posited that Washington’s interest in Hungary had increased.⁷

On his way to his new post, Butler Wright spent a few days in the French capital in the first days of June. Here, during this transition period in Paris, he met with Hungarian diplomats in

²Diary entry, Petrograd, November 12, 1917, Box 2 Series IV: Diaries, 1909–1936, Joshua Butler Wright Papers.

³For the biographical information, see, Allison (2002), pp. xiv–xx; “Joshua Butler Wright (1877–1939).”

⁴Foreign Service of the U.S., Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Affairs (1924), pp. 47–56, 59–71.

⁵On the Rogers Act, see, Wright (1926), pp. 1–4, Heinrichs (1966), pp. 95–106, 115–117, Schulzinger (1975), Werking (1977), Gelfand (1988), “The Rogers Act”, Lamont (2014).

⁶*Time*, February, 28, 1927.

⁷*Az Est*, February 17, 1927; *Pesti Napló*, February 17, 1927.

Paris such as Frigyes Korányi and Antal Ullein-Reviczky of the Hungarian Legation, and exchanged a few basic ideas with them. But based upon his diary entries, he was more fascinated by Charles A. Lindbergh, who had just completed his nonstop transatlantic flight to France a few days prior to Butler Wright's arrival.⁸ Already in Paris the new minister was sought out by Hungarian newspapermen. In an interview he gave there, Butler Wright emphasized the role of American newspapers and how the trust between journalists and politicians worked in the United States. He also said that in way of preparation for the job in Hungary he had conversations with László Széchenyi, the Hungarian Minister in Washington, János Pelényi, the secretary of the Legation, and a four-hour talk with Jeremiah Smith, Jr., the famed American Commissioner-General of the financial reconstruction of Hungary, orchestrated by the League of Nation, 1924–26. In addition, he mentioned that in the realm of trade he believed in fair competition, while in armament he thought the size of armies ought to be limited to being able to defend their home country, but not enough in scope to conquer others.⁹ Next to his conversations, he had read books regarding Hungary's past. Undoubtedly, and as a contrast to his predecessor, Butler Wright arrived with some knowledge regarding Hungarian history, politics, economics, and even literature.

ARRIVAL

When Butler Wright arrived in Hungary, the country was at the peak of its postwar economic boom. The financial reconstruction, spearheaded by the League of Nations, proved to be a success: Hungary had become an economically and financially stable country, foreign loans came in, the currency was stable, savings grew, unemployment was low, although all this positive data only meant that Hungary managed to surpass the prewar levels. Still, it was on the rise, and Italy's friendship, officially declared in April 1927, boosted Hungary's international standing as well.

Butler Wright arrived in Budapest on June 8, and soon enough he had a chance to meet the political leaders of the country—István Bethlen and Miklós Horthy—and size them up. One of his first impressions of the reigning prime minister was the following: "I found Bethlen about what I have expected, but much better looking; also apparently well groomed as his appearance gave favorable impression. His English is good and his manner cordial. He seemed tired."¹⁰ A few days later he presented his credentials to Admiral Horthy, the Regent of Hungary, and just like every American minister in the Interwar years, he was genuinely impressed by the ceremony and gave a detailed description of the event in his diary.¹¹ Horthy did not disappoint on the occasion. To start with, he brought up Jeremiah Smith, Jr. and his role in the financial reconstruction of Hungary, which had been completed the year before, and how much conditions in general had improved in the country. But then he switched to the topic of Bolshevism, and was

⁸Diary entries, May 22, May 28, May 31, June 2, June 3, and June 4, 1927, Series 4: Diaries, Minister to Hungary, 23 May–25 Dec 1927, Box 2, Joshua Butler Wright Papers.

⁹*Az Est*, June 1, 1927; *Pesti Napló*, June 9, 1927; *Budapesti Hírlap*, August 26, 1927.

¹⁰Diary entry, June 14, 1927, Series 4: Diaries, Minister to Hungary, 23 May–25 Dec 1927, Box 2, Joshua Butler Wright Papers.

¹¹Diary entry, June 18, 1927, *ibid.*

in particular interested in the American minister's experience in Russia during the revolution. Later in the conversation he turned to his other pet subject: hunting.¹² Butler Wright's initiation into Hungarian wines also took place at a lunch with the Horthys, where only he and his wife were the guests. The simple lunch was "followed by some Tokay that was a dream of dreams! I never believed that such wine could exist."¹³

BUTLER WRIGHT'S WORK AND EXPERIENCE IN HUNGARY

Instead of going through the minister's work in Hungary in a chronological manner, it might be more useful to highlight certain areas that were vital to his job as representative of the United States while in Hungary. This method also allows us to gain insight into the issues that were of greater concern to Washington and to the American diplomat in Budapest.

In his first report to the State Department, Butler Wright set the structure and tone for his monthly and sometimes special reports. These reports were meticulously compartmentalized into two overarching headings: Hungarian foreign affairs and domestic political issues. These then were broken down into various subtopics covering such issues as present political and commercial relations with neighboring countries, the work of the Hungarian Parliament, the perennial question of the king's authority, which Washington evidently found so intriguing, and other news and events that were of importance at certain times.

REVISION

The most pressing issue was undoubtedly the matter of revision in Hungary. Consequently, Butler Wright's reports typically commenced with an overview of the news and events pertaining to the Trianon Treaty and its subsequent impact in Hungary. This topic may be regarded as the dominant focus of information reaching Washington. This was the all-defining point and no other issue came close in the ministerial reports. As was his custom, Butler Wright sometimes quoted long sections from Hungarian and European papers that reflected on the question of Trianon at any given moment. His first report for the month of June 1927 included the most notable occurrence of the season: the Rothermere article published in the Daily Mail, which advocated for the return of territories lost to Hungary in the Trianon Treaty.¹⁴ The article naturally "was received with the greatest enthusiasm throughout" Hungary, however, most European countries believed it meant peril to an already precarious situation in which the voices of many have-nots cried for greater recognition.¹⁵ The Bethlen government realized as well that especially the western powers looked askance at the unfolding propaganda effort, and was quick to announce that not only did it have nothing to do with Rothermere's article but it also did not

¹²Diary entry, June 18, 1927, *ibid.*

¹³Diary entry, August 16, 1927, *ibid.* The Horthys appealed to him. He found them delightful and declared that he had never "had a more pleasant and natural experience with a head of state." *Ibid.*

¹⁴Harmsworth (1927). Also see, Romsics (2004), Orzoff (2009), pp. 154–57.

¹⁵Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, June 30, 1927, 864.00/703, Roll 8, M. 708, NARA.

think treaty revision was a realistic option at the moment.¹⁶ Butler Wright remarked that revision was “nearest and dearest to the Hungarian heart [...] a theme whose variations are endless, whose melody is sweet to the Hungarian ear.”¹⁷ But, as always, he paid Bethlen his dues in his efforts to curb the press, never letting the issue go to sleep, but never letting the flames get too high.¹⁸

On account of the question, Butler Wright made the following observation regarding Hungarians and their place in Europe: “One gains the impression that these people are convinced that Hungary is an important factor in the general European policy of England and other great Powers; this is bred from their intense national spirit and love of country, which, I believe, is unsurpassed anywhere else in the world.”¹⁹ He was convinced that with this campaign the Hungarians only destroyed what they had achieved in the past seven years by adhering honestly to the new system in Europe. That is why it was crucial that Bethlen distanced himself from the English lord’s words, and he also managed to keep the lid on these sentiments of an obviously fired-up public mind and atmosphere. This was obviously reassuring news to Washington constantly afraid that the shaky status quo of European politics might be disturbed.²⁰ But the man on the street in Hungary was jubilant and daydreaming was feverish, so the incident was a good vehicle for the American minister “to indicate the passions existing in the hearts of these people and how thin is the veneer of amity which is sometimes used to conclude treaties in Europe.”²¹ He also mentioned the Italian–Hungarian Treaty, the manifestation of recent Italian friendship toward Hungary, which was crucial in that Italy was the first large power in Europe that openly claimed it was going to aid Hungarian efforts of treaty revision.²²

Thus, the bigger half of the first report was in connection with the Treaty of Trianon. This is not surprising. The revisionist aims of Hungary were no secret to the State Department, and it naturally wanted to know how this movement was evolving and whether they should fear that the Hungarian government might endanger peace in the region. Washington needed not fear though, because Bethlen was much more pragmatic than to commit any hotheaded move for which there would have been no adequate Hungarian military power anyway.

The Hungarian propaganda for revision by Hungarian-Americans was also of concern to the State Department, especially after the trip of the so-called “Kossuth Pilgrims,” a Hungarian delegation of almost five hundred to witness the unveiling of Kossuth’s statue in New York. In February 1928, the pilgrimage also caused some anxiety for Butler Wright, who feared the potential revisionist propaganda inherent in the large body traveling to the United States.

¹⁶*Magyarország*, August 6, 1927.

¹⁷Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, December 6, 1928, 864.00 PR/13, Roll 10, M. 708, NARA.

¹⁸Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, December 6, 1928, 864.00 PR/13, *ibid*; Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, March 13, 1929, 864.00/732, Roll 8, M. 708, NARA.

¹⁹Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, September 30, 1927, 864.00/708, Roll 8, M. 708, NARA. When the Rothermere’s son, Esmond Harmsworth, paid a ten-day visit to Hungary in May 1928, Butler Wright characterized the Hungarian welcome and treatment of this private citizen as “almost pathetic in its childlike earnestness.” Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, June 6, 1928, 864.00 PR/7, Roll 10, M. 708, NARA.

²⁰Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, February 5, 1929, 864.00 PR/15, and J. Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, March 12, 1929, 864.00 PR/16, Roll 11, M. 708, NARA.

²¹Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, July 31, 1927, 864.00/705, Roll 8, M. 708, NARA.

²²For more detail about the Italian–Hungarian Treaty of friendship, see, [Hamerli \(2018\)](#), pp. 25–64.

Therefore, when such a patriotic organization in the United States planned a grand conference with an invitation to members of the Hungarian government, the Department asked Butler Wright to warn the Hungarians, through his informal channels to Bethlen and others, that such an event would be embarrassing to the United States government, that it would receive complaints from the countries of the Little Entente, and that it would ultimately not help but rather hurt the Hungarian cause.²³ Accordingly, Butler Wright brought the matter up with the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Lajos Walko, who said that the government did not have any control over the various organizations in the United States, but promised he would ask Zsigmond Perényi, president of the Hungarian National Association (Magyar Nemzeti Szövetség) to try to exert a calming influence on the organization in question.²⁴ Indeed, a few days later in a meeting between Bethlen, Ferenc Herczeg, President of the Hungarian League for Revision, Perényi, and Tibor Eckhardt it was agreed that cold water should be poured on such activities in America so as not to harm the cause of the Hungarian government and its long-term plan for revision.²⁵

Regarding the general support for revision in post-war Hungary, Butler Wright stated the following: “The Hungarian mind may be said to have been inoculated with the idea of revision the day after the signature of the Treaty of Trianon. This idea germinated and fermented in the blood stream until it developed into a well-defined disease whose first symptom was the passionate ‘Nem, Nem, Soha’ so familiar in the early years after the war.”²⁶ But what was supposed to be the common denominator of the national feeling had become the prey of politics and now was “on the road to becoming the subject of a disorderly squabble among the several factions who wish to appropriate it to their own interests.”²⁷ What he did was that he offered an analysis of the evolution of revisionist feelings and agenda in Hungary. The first stage began with the signing of the Trianon Treaty, which presented significant challenges. However, these were overcome through effective reconstruction efforts. The second stage commenced with the Rothermere article, which triggered a period of rapid change. Bethlen’s leadership was crucial in maintaining stability amidst these shifts. He saw the third stage beginning when political forces began to diverge, each pursuing their own agendas.

FOREIGN POLICY

Additionally, foreign policy issues constituted a significant aspect of the political discourse during Butler Wright’s tenure. One of them was the so-called Optants case, which became a regular feature in his reports throughout his years at his post. This question posed a long-lasting and challenging issue for the League of Nations.²⁸ In 1921, the Romanian government enacted legislation that effectively revoked the property rights of Hungarian citizens who had opted for

²³W. R. Castle Jr. to Joshua Butler Wright, March 8, 1929, 864.00/732/a, *ibid.*

²⁴Joshua Butler Wright to W. R. Castle Jr., April 8, 1929, 864.00/733, *ibid.*

²⁵Joshua Butler Wright to William R. Castle, Jr., April 26, 1929, Box 8: Hungary, 1927–1932, William Castle, Jr. Papers.

²⁶Joshua Butler Wright to Henry L. Stimson, May 10, 1929, 864.00 PR/18, Roll 11, M. 708, NARA.

²⁷Joshua Butler Wright to Henry L. Stimson, May 10, 1929, 864.00 PR/18, *ibid.*

²⁸On the optants question, see Deák (1928), Matheovics (1929), Nagy (1930), pp. 57–82, Aradi (2002), Case (2009), pp. 27–30, Hamerli (2018), pp. 154–68, Berkes (2020).

Hungarian citizenship following the peace treaty. Hungary claimed that this law violated certain aspects of the Treaty of Trianon, whereas the Romanians argued that their state's sovereignty took precedence over the protection of another treaty. In 1923, Hungary, a duly recognized member of the League of Nations, sought assistance from the organization in determining the legitimacy of the conflicting parties. The subsequent seven-year period was characterized by a challenging yet ultimately inconclusive legal process. The League attempted to act as an intermediary between the two countries, but this proved unsuccessful since the Romanian government contested the authority of the Rumanian–Hungarian Mixed Arbitral Tribunal with regard to the matter in question. Romania sought to consolidate the cases of the Optants with those of reparations. The issue was of significant domestic concern for both countries, and the League adhered to its established protocol, refraining from involvement on behalf of either party. Butler Wright well summarized the significance of the problem after studying it in more detail. He thought it was not “a transcendently important question ‘per se’, but it is indisputable that it is a salient factor in the scrutiny and appraisal of the League by the smaller nations.”²⁹ He was right in this assessment. Hungary had expected the League to show more energy in the field of minority protection, which was of paramount importance to Budapest and was also a legally enshrined right under the terms of the Trianon Treaty and League membership. Hungarians were indignant at what they viewed as the Romanian dilatory tactic, which anger resulted in “a perfect storm of protest” that was “directed against the League of Nations not only in the press but also in the Hungarian Parliament.”³⁰

In 1929, another foreign policy scandal emerged, once more involving Hungary. Consequently, the League of Nations was compelled to utilize its offices and mechanisms to restore stability. The circumstances surrounding Szentgotthárd were of shorter duration than the Optants affair but more complex and truly embarrassing for both Hungary and the League. In January 1928, at the western Hungarian border town of Szentgotthárd, Austrian customs officials halted a train en route from Italy to Poland. In five of the vehicles, weapons were discovered that were listed in the official customs documents as machine components. It became evident that the shipment was destined for Hungary, which constituted a clear violation of the Treaty of Trianon, which prohibited the provision of weapons to the Hungarian army. The League set up a Committee of Three, which in turn suggested to conduct a strictly technical investigation in Hungary. In accordance with the findings of a seven-member League delegation, which conducted an investigation in April, the next League Assembly, held in June, concluded that the matter was closed without determining any fault on the part of Hungary.³¹ As Butler

²⁹Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, November 10, 1927, 864.00/709, Roll 8, M. 708, NARA.

³⁰Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, June 30, 1927, 864.00/703, *ibid.* In one of the very detailed reports on the Optants question a few weeks later, he amusingly added, “The only touch of humor in the whole rather dreary proceedings at Geneva, which, incidentally must be cordially dreaded by the members of the League, was to be seen in the rapidity and earnestness with which Sir Austen’s colleagues arose to praise the excellent work which had been done by him as Chairman of the Committee of Three, and to urge him to withdraw his request to be allowed to resign – all in a cold sweat for fear lest one of them be forced to serve in his place.” Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, September 30, 1927, 864.00/708, *ibid.*

³¹*LNJ*, 9th Year, no. 7 (July 1928), Fiftieth Session of the Council, pp. 905–18 and 1009–21. On the Szentgotthárd incident also see Zsiga (1990), Zsiga (2008), Császár (2013), Hamerli (2018), pp. 86–92.

Wright reported, the news naturally “was received in this country with general expressions of satisfaction.”³² He found the entire situation “a very confused” one, primarily due to his assessment that the Hungarian government was not preparing for any aggressive military action, which made the smuggling of arms into the country appear to be a questionable decision.³³ The minister’s diary notes are a clear indication that he found the affair critical, especially during the early weeks.³⁴ It also provided another impulse to describe Hungarians. It is worth quoting his take on the current situation and how he perceived the general Hungarian sentiment: “Hungary and her people have many faults: as a nation she is uncompromisingly proud, and possesses that intolerance and conceit which springs from pride; almost all her people are given to that exuberance in the expression of patriotism which frequently transgresses the bounds of reason and wisdom; and there is no doubt that there are a large number of hotheads in the upper classes, and some in the lower, who, from a spirit of adventure and intense hatred of those who now possess their former lands, would unhesitatingly involve themselves in a clandestine plan to import arms for a future emergency. On the other hand, however, it requires only a cursory examination of Hungary’s economic situation to perceive that she is financially unable to undertake anything of the kind: not only was she defeated in the world’s greatest war, but notwithstanding her remarkable economic recovery she is having difficulty in restricting her expenditures in order to balance her budget, while over and over again comes Count Bethlen’s reiterated counsel that Hungary should devote all her present endeavor to increasing the resources which have been left to her.”³⁵ It proves once more that despite the persistent calls for revision, the government was pragmatic and recognized that the economic, diplomatic, and military shortcomings did not align with the revisionist objectives.

Based on his preparation and early experience in Budapest, he concluded that Hungary’s relationship with its neighbors were as follows: “Toward Austria she feels a strange relationship—somewhat like that toward a first cousin, once removed, who has shown traits which cause regret that he had ever become a member of the family,” he wrote. In the case of Czechoslovakia, he felt that the general feeling was “that of intense mourning for Hungary’s lost provinces and the oft-repeated hope that some day they may be restored, at least in part.” What he saw in the Hungarian press convinced him that the relationship was considerably more amicable with the southern neighbor than with the other two members of the Little Entente. With regard to Romania, he described the prevailing Hungarian attitude “as one of loathing and contempt—these are strong words but they portray the situation, and woe to any outsider who ventures to counsel moderation in this regard.”³⁶

The most notable achievement of the United States in the realm of diplomacy during Butler Wright’s tenure was the Kellogg-Briand Pact, which established the principle of non-aggression as a means of resolving international disputes. After the signing of the Pact in August 1928,

³²Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, April 2, 1928, 864.00 PR/5, Austria-Hungary and Hungary, 1912–1929, Roll 10, M. 708, NARA.

³³Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, March 9, 1928, 864.00 PR/4, *ibid.*

³⁴Diary entries, January 14, 1928, January 16, 1928, January 20, 1928, January 23, 1928, January 25, 1928, January 31, 1928, February 16, 1928, February 28, 1928, March 7, 1928, Series 4: Diaries, Minister to Hungary, 1 Jan–6 Apr 1928, Box 2, Joshua Butler Wright Papers.

³⁵Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, March 9, 1928, 864.00 PR/4, Roll 10, M. 708, NARA.

³⁶Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, August 24, 1927, 864.00/706, Roll 8, M. 708, NARA.

Washington wished to see more countries join their effort—among them Hungary. This American agenda was particularly comprehensible in light of the fact that, as Butler Wright reported, the initial American appeal to the international community to renounce war as a means of resolving disputes failed to elicit any substantial debate in the Hungarian press.³⁷ Following the formal signing of the Pact in Paris, Butler Wright was directed to present an aide-mémoire to the Hungarian government, urging its participation in the growing number of countries adhering to the Pact. At the end of August, when Hungary was ready to join the Pact, the local press expressed both its hope and doubts regarding the practical viability of the plan.³⁸ Butler Wright included a long passage from Albert Apponyi in his report, who also had ambivalent feelings regarding the Pact. The old and venerable politician thought it was laudable, even if naïve, to believe that simply by renouncing war it would disappear. And “what will be the method of settling international conflict?”, he posed the question, and then went on to add that “unless we are able to prevent the outbreak of conflicts, the spark of war will inevitably be kindled, however benignly it may be fought against,” therefore the Pact did not offer a realistic and pragmatic solution.³⁹

THE MINISTER AS LINK

Another significant aspect of Butler Wright’s contributions was his role as an official link between the two countries, facilitating professional networking and fostering a constructive relationship with the political elite in Hungary. In accordance with the responsibilities inherent to his position, Butler Wright served as the official and cordial link between Washington and Budapest. For instance, shortly after the customary July 4th celebration, he was once again required to act as the primary point of contact between the two countries. First, a delegation of American journalists visited Hungary, who were traveling under the auspices of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The group of fifty spent five days in Hungary during their European tour.⁴⁰ Subsequently, in the autumn, at the unveiling of the Lajos Kossuth statue next to the building of Parliament, he once again represented his country and delivered a brief address that was consistent with the significance of the occasion.⁴¹ “I participated,” he wrote to the State Department, “as special representative of the Government of the United States.”⁴² He somewhat proudly recorded in his diary that “[w]hen wreaths were laid, ours was the first of those of special representatives—and I tried a speech of one sentence in Hungarian. It seemed to make a hit.”⁴³ And indeed, Hungarian newspapers offered positive commentary on the

³⁷Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, April 2, 1928, 864.00 PR/5, *ibid.*

³⁸Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, without date, but sometime September 1928, 864.00 PR/10, Roll 10, M. 708, NARA; *Budapesti Hírlap*, August 29, 1928; *Nemzeti Újság*, August 29, 1928; *Pesti Napló*, August 29, 1928.

³⁹Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, December 6, 1928, 864.00 PR/13, Roll 10, M. 708, NARA. For the original speech in its entirety, see *Budapesti Hírlap*, November 25, 1928.

⁴⁰See, *Pesti Hírlap*, August 26, 1927; *Budapesti Hírlap*, August 26, 1927; *Pesti Napló*, August 26, 1927; *Pesti Napló*, August 28, 1927.

⁴¹See, *Magyarország*, November 8, 1927; *Budapesti Hírlap*, November 8, 1927; *Pesti Napló*, November 8, 1927.

⁴²Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, November 8, 1927, 864.413K84/1, Roll 21, M. 708, NARA.

⁴³Diary entry, November 6, 1927, Series 4: Diaries, Minister to Hungary, 23 May–25 Dec 1927, Box 2, Joshua Butler Wright Papers.

minister's efforts to establish a connection between Kossuth and Washington as national leaders who fought for freedom. He noted that he and the legation "received a *very good press*."⁴⁴

The American minister frequently obtained information through informal conversations in his own residence or at social gatherings, as well as on hunting trips where the atmosphere of intimacy allowed for the disclosure of otherwise confidential thoughts. In characterizing the political gossip in Budapest, he offered the following description: "this hot-bed of intrigue where every word and notion is soon known in all circles and freely commented upon."⁴⁵

Prior to his departure for the summer vacation of 1929, he engaged in a series of informal discussions with the most prominent politicians in Hungary. From Horthy, he learned that there were too many impassioned advocates for revision who demanded immediate action, and that he had to exercise restraint. Bethlen informed him that the government's primary objectives were economic stabilization and the establishment of improved relations with neighboring countries. At this juncture, the government was not inclined to pursue either revision or the appointment of a monarch. Foreign Minister Lajos Walko, for his part, informed the American minister that the government did not wish to force the minority question too much, as they believed that in the long run it would be more advantageous for Hungary. However, they felt it was necessary to demonstrate their commitment to the Hungarians remaining in the successor states. Rusztem Vámbéry, a radical Socialist, echoed some of the thoughts Butler Wright had heard from the aforementioned politicians, emphasizing the decadence of the Hungarian aristocracy. Butler Wright concurred with this assessment.⁴⁶

Upon his return to Hungary in the fall, he proceeded to engage in discussions with a range of individuals and entities, including government officials, members of the opposition, journalists, bankers, and various acquaintances. Based on these conversations he prepared a report for the Secretary of State in which he described how he saw "the present confused picture in this country," and "the anomalies which characterize Hungarian political life." He observed that "the economic crisis [...] ties with treaty revision for first place." Additionally, he addressed the topic of press reform, and in connection with it he gave a low score to Hungarian journalism: "with one or two exceptions, the ethical standing of the Hungarian press is not high." In light of what took place in 1931, it is illuminating that "rumor now has it that before long the Prime Minister may resign—on the issue either of reparations or the economic crisis." Bethlen ultimately persisted in his role until August 1931. However, the latter stages of his premiership were largely characterized by crisis management. Butler Wright's additional observation proved fruitful, despite the two-year interval that elapsed between his departure from Hungary and the manifestation of its consequences. He predicted that Gyula Gömbös "promises to be a prominent figure in the future political life of Hungary." Starting with October 1932, Gömbös became the prime minister for the next four years.⁴⁷ All this proves that Butler Wright had a sharp eye and proficiency in analytical thinking.

In his capacity as the official link and cultural representative of the United States, Butler Wright was obliged to assume a formal public role. The annual July 4th celebrations were

⁴⁴Diary entry, November 8, 1927, *ibid.* Emphasis in the original.

⁴⁵Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, March 13, 1929, 864.00/732, Roll 8, M. 708, NARA.

⁴⁶Joshua Butler Wright to Henry L. Stimson, May 12, 1929, 864.00/734, Roll 8, M. 708, NARA.

⁴⁷The quotes in the paragraph are from Joshua Butler Wright to Henry L. Stimson, October 22, 1929, 864.00/735, *ibid.*

previously noted, but wreaths were laid at Washington's statue in August 1928 as well, when a significant delegation of Hungarian-Americans visited their country of origin.⁴⁸ On such occasions, the American minister always called attention to Hungary's long history and its love of freedom, and likened Kossuth and Washington. He felt, however, that "the visit of this large body of Hungarian-Americans to this country inspired less enthusiasm than might have been expected, possibly due to the fact that very few important personages joined the pilgrimage. Undoubtedly, many of the delegates who had emigrated to America as peasants, took advantage of the cheap transportation offered at this time to return to the country of their birth for purely personal reasons."⁴⁹ Naturally, he was also present when the first telephone call took place between Budapest and Washington.⁵⁰ With regard to cultural matters, he delivered a lecture on the subject of American self-government, in addition to providing a discourse on the geographical features and economic impact of the United States.⁵¹ He often praised the Opera in Budapest, and he regularly went on hunting trips. He was fond of this latter activity and collected many impressions regarding Hungarian hunting traditions and types of game.⁵² He sometimes commented the surprisingly high number of suicides in the country, and frequently documented the anti-Jewish sentiment, particularly in relation to the discriminatory practices against Jewish students at various academic institutions following the implementation of the Numerus Clausus policy in 1920.

BUTLER WRIGHT ON THE HUNGARIANS

A further aspect of his work related to the minister's opinion on the country and its people. In a letter written to the State Department after his first month in Europe, he outlined two key observations, based on the limited time he had spent in the region: the Hungarian government "gives every evidence of desiring a full and frank understanding and friendship with the United States," and that his fellow diplomats in Budapest "show little or no reserve in speaking of matters concerning the relations with Hungary of their respective countries."⁵³ In his diary he gave a somewhat different account and found four major points for the future, although he well understood that first impressions might be misleading. To himself the main points were the following: "First: The 'King question' will never die, but is now dormant, and will remain so if Bethlen can keep it so. Second: The territorial question is always to the fore—in Hungarian press and in that of neighbors—and is a sore point because no one will be sufficiently generous on either side. Third: We are easily the most popular of all nations—with the British a close second. Fourth: Everyone seems willing and anxious to talk—even on contentious subject."⁵⁴

⁴⁸*Budapesti Hírlap*, July 3, 1928; *Az Est*, August 23, 1928; *Magyarország*, August 23, 1928; *Pesti Napló*, August 23, 1928.

⁴⁹Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, without date, but sometime September, 1928, 864.00 PR/10, Roll 10, M. 708, NARA.

⁵⁰*Budapesti Hírlap*, November 13, 1928; *Pesti Napló*, November 13, 1928; *Magyarország*, November 13, 1928.

⁵¹*Budapesti Hírlap*, October 4, 1928; *Pesti Napló*, October 4, 1928; *Pesti Napló*, February 28, 1929.

⁵²"Hungarian Impressions. An Outline for Future Use," Box 3, Series IV: Diaries, 1927–1928, Joshua Butler Wright Papers.

⁵³Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, July 8, 1927, 864.00/704, Roll 8, M. 708, NARA.

⁵⁴Diary entry, July 7, 1927, Series 4: Diaries, Minister to Hungary, 23 May–25 Dec 1927, Box 2, Joshua Butler Wright Papers.

Additionally, he accurately assessed the challenges inherent to his role in Hungary, a perception that resonated with all American ministers during that period: The language barrier prevented him from engaging with the general public and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, which made it difficult to gain a comprehensive understanding of Hungarian attitudes and beliefs.⁵⁵ Without that source, he had no alternative but to rely to a certain extent on some propaganda carried out by newspapers and politicians.

After a period of three months he felt that he had gained sufficient local experience to begin exploring Hungary and to begin to discern certain undercurrents of affairs. However, he was aware that there was still much to be discovered, particularly in the field of economics.⁵⁶ His diverse observations prompted him to draw parallels between the Hungarians and other groups, including the Slavs and Latin Americans, with whom he had prior interactions. This assessment, however, was not universally well-received among Hungarians. He described them as “very volatile; very loquacious; given to promises but not to deeds; vain; sensitive and very proud; rather sensuous; fearfully procrastinating; not efficient or cooperative; [...] enthusiastic today, cool to morrow [sic], cold within a week—and very likeable!”⁵⁷ He later reiterated this sentiment but added a caveat: “the Hungarians, while very likeable, occasionally must be guided or restrained like children.”⁵⁸ As a man of his times and representative of the United States, which country had in many ways become the number one power in the world, Butler Wright exhibited a pronounced inclination towards cultural superiority when engaged in the exploration of other cultures. Such poor countries as Honduras, Brazil, or Russia, did not compare favorably with abundant America, and this was also the case for postwar Hungary. When he subsequently added to the aforementioned characteristics a few more, this attitude broke through: “over-indulgence in eating and drinking; great fondness for secrets; [...] very little administrative ability; given to delays and/or procrastination; love of the fresh air; appreciation of music; unequalled patriotism and pride.”⁵⁹ There were both negative and positive characteristics, yet the pervasive tone of patronization is particularly hard to miss.

He came to the conclusion that a more dynamic methodology was required to successfully complete the task at hand, and, in addition to his regular reports, he sent separate messages that focused on a single issue. Accordingly, to provide a more comprehensive account of Hungarian affairs, he summarized his own observations, which he believed might prove useful to the State Department. This was not an act that other ministers typically did, which does not mean that they did not convey their own thoughts toward Washington. It is rather the formula of a separate dispatch that puts Butler Wright in another league, and it is another reminder of his seasoned foreign service experience, his highly organized mind, and the work he did in the very same fashion. Since these thoughts reflect more clearly how he perceived the country around him, it is worth taking a closer look at some of his ideas.

⁵⁵Diary entry, July 14, 1927, *ibid.*

⁵⁶Diary entry, September 8, 1927, *ibid.*

⁵⁷Diary entry, September 16, 1927, *ibid.*

⁵⁸Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, March 9, 1928, 864.00 PR/4, Roll 10, M. 708, NARA.

⁵⁹Diary entry, October 23, 1927, Series 4: Diaries, Minister to Hungary, 23 May–25 Dec 1927, Box 2, Joshua Butler Wright Papers.

“The kaleidoscopic nature of the present situation,” he started, “however, with its fleeting passions, provocative press reports, and petty squabbles, can hardly be fully and correctly portrayed without an occasional background of a lighter vein, because the warp and woof of Hungarian relations is literally threaded with gossip, rumor, fact and fancy.” It is possible that Hungary was not a significant location in the context of global events, but he warned that “I cannot entirely rid myself of the impression that basic principles of great international importance which impinge directly upon Hungary are being constantly ignored by the greater Powers in their treatment of matters so vital to the peace of southeastern Europe: where there is so much smoke there must be fire, and glowing sparks may very easily be found by those who look for them.” Butler Wright detected the tangible threat to the shaky peace unless it was not controlled constructively. This was, of course, not the responsibility of the United States, rather that of France and Great Britain. They should have smoothed the ruffles between “haves” and “have nots” in the region. He also wrote how the Hungarians thought about the Optants case and its significance, and how this added to the true nature of Hungarian character. “Many Hungarians are dejectedly reserved, even to the point of self-depreciation, save when certain nerves are touched—then the utterances of a proud, intolerant and loquacious people know few limits.” Additionally, he highlighted the pivotal role of the economic situation, noting a discernible enhancement over the recent past. He underscored the enduring appeal of the United States and Americans, emphasizing the strength and authenticity of this popularity. Ultimately, he posited that the country’s economic and political standing was on an upward trajectory. However, he cautioned that the potential for further trade successes hinged on the avoidance of any misguided innuendos with the countries of the Little Entente.⁶⁰

Butler Wright’s opinion on the suitability of a republican form of government in Hungary was shaped by a combination of factors, including the perennial king question, the tangible features of Hungarian politics and society, and an intimate conversation with the Hungarian Minister of Justice, Butler Wright asserted that “a republican form of Government is not suited to this country or, as it may perhaps be better put, Hungary will never be wholly amenable to the principles of democracy,” a crushing although not surprising judgment.⁶¹ Following the same argument, he said of Bethlen that the prime minister “was following, however, not only the dictates of prudence—which it is unusual to find in such sustained degree in a Hungarian—and of calm, common sense, to which quality even his enemies pay tribute.”⁶² In relation to the larger topic of revision, he sometimes sent long cables about Bethlen’s speeches and reactions to it in newspapers across Europe. In his praise of Bethlen, he assessed that at the moment no one could replace him at the helm since the prime minister was “an astute politician and an adroit strategist, his unusually accurate mind, his strict adherence to the truth and almost puritanical simplicity of life, render it almost impossible for one to trip him up, and his power flows principally from his ability to retain the support of a parliamentary majority.”⁶³ But the Hungarian experience of centuries—rebellion against authority—created a nation that needed a

⁶⁰The quotes in the paragraph are from Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, November 10, 1927, 864.00/709, Roll 8, M. 708, NARA.

⁶¹Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, December 16, 1927, 864.00/712, *ibid.*

⁶²J. Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, December 16, 1927, 864.00/712, *ibid.*

⁶³Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, November 15, 1928, 764.00/16, Roll 1, M. 710, NARA.

controlling hand, and the semi-democratic political setting in Hungary, a country of “anomalies and contradictions,” proved, at least in Butler Wright’s mind, that “Bethlen’s method of approach is best.”⁶⁴ He basically argued that a certain strict policy must be maintained in order to have relatively calm relations with the neighboring countries and within Hungary as well, and Bethlen delivered this task. These lines are a good snapshot of how official American diplomacy really viewed Hungary and Hungarian policy in the late 1920s. Nevertheless, in consideration of the mental and professional challenges, as well as the distinctive setting in Hungary, Butler Wright was “more than ever satisfied with [my] position here” as the new year started.⁶⁵

Butler Wright also made observations about Hungarian politicians and the upper class en masse. When a new Ministry of Economics was established under János Bud, former Minister of Finance, in September 1928, Butler Wright first praised Bethlen’s governing skills but immediately claimed that there were not enough talented or willing people to fill the ranks of government and Parliament, which was a scathing criticism of the aristocrats. “The so-called ‘magnate class,’” he wrote, “appears to be able to supply nothing: the older generation of this class will never fully learn the lesson of tolerance and democratic principles; the younger generation, although superior in cultural education, have never had to work and would soon crumble under any sustained effort which might even approximate that exerted by Count Bethlen and desired by him of his subordinates.”⁶⁶ In his private diary he labeled the Hungarian aristocracy “intense and absurd.”⁶⁷ “The older generation,” he went on, “have not been willing to learn the lesson of the war; the younger snippets do nothing for their country and live by whittling off [...] of their estates. It is greatly [...] regretted that these youngsters are tempted to do nothing in the way of ‘work’.”⁶⁸ On account of the debates attacking the governing United Party, once he characterized Hungarian politicians in general: they “display their lamentable tendency to fish in troubled waters, irrespective of party.”⁶⁹ It is evident that the official Hungarian policies and practices were the subject of considerable contention on his part.

THE MINISTER’S DEPARTURE

It is possible that Butler Wright’s transfer to a new diplomatic post was discussed as early as the summer of 1929. At the very least, based on the contents of a personal letter, this would appear to be a reasonable assumption. While on vacation in the United States, he wrote to Assistant Secretary of State William R. Castle, Jr. that “I am very happy and interested where I am: that I will gladly go anywhere that I may be needed.”⁷⁰ This would suggest that there were already

⁶⁴Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, November 15, 1928, 764.00/16, *ibid.*

⁶⁵Diary entry, January 12, 1928, Series 4: Diaries, Minister to Hungary, 1 Jan–6 Apr 1928, Box 2, Joshua Butler Wright Papers.

⁶⁶Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, August 4, 1928, 864.002/81, Roll 12, M. 708, NARA.

⁶⁷“Hungarian Impressions. An Outline for Future Use,” Box 3, Series IV: Diaries, 1927–1928, Joshua Butler Wright Papers.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*

⁶⁹Joshua Butler Wright to Frank B. Kellogg, March 5, 1929, 864.00/728, Roll 8, M. 708, NARA.

⁷⁰Joshua Butler Wright to William R. Castle, Jr., August 23, 1929, Box 8: Hungary, 1927–1932, William Castle, Jr. Papers.

plans or discussions underway about a potential transfer. Castle tried to reassure him that if he were to be reassigned to Latin America, it would be solely due to the desire of President Herbert Hoover to deploy more capable foreign service personnel in locations where their work was challenging and deemed crucial to Washington as opposed to secure European posts that were not vital from American perspectives.⁷¹ This argument may have been a mere pretext for a transfer, but it is likely that Castle was correct in his assertion that at the time of Butler Wright's transfer to Montevideo, Uruguay, in 1930, Budapest was "a delightful place. On the other hand, it does not get you any where in the Service."⁷² Montevideo, however, was really important from the president's perspective because the United States was not well received in that country and the country was also scheduled to host the next Pan American Conference in 1933. Therefore, it was an opportunity for U.S. diplomats to enhance their careers by demonstrating their capabilities in a challenging environment. Butler Wright tried to look on the bright side: "It is a wrench to leave this delightful place and the problems presented by conditions today in Central Europe. And yet I frankly confess that I sniff with pleasure and interest the things that lie ahead."⁷³

During the final weeks of his stay in Budapest, his hosts ensured that the farewell would be a memorable one. A series of dinners were held in his honor, during which he was the recipient of considerable praise. He eschewed political discourse, acknowledged the advent of challenging times (the initial manifestations of an impending economic downturn were discernible), yet exhorted the Hungarian populace to adopt a more optimistic outlook regarding the future. Hungarians were also immensely happy to hear that his two daughters had learned Hungarian fairly well. He said he had grown fond of the country and its people and expressed his wish to visit Hungary at least once a year in the future.⁷⁴ These words were delivered in a professional manner, consistent with the reputation of Butler Wright as a seasoned American diplomat.

CONCLUSION

What criteria should be employed to assess the performance of Butler Wright during his tenure in Hungary? Given the amicable yet superficial nature of the official relationship between the United States and Hungary, an American minister during that period served more as a symbol of bilateral ties than as an active proponent of enhanced connections. Such expectations were, however, devoid of any realistic foundation. The United States did not perceive Hungary as a significant partner, whether in commercial or diplomatic matters. Upon his arrival, Hungary was experiencing an economic boom. However, by the time Butler Wright departed, the country was facing significant economic challenges. It is reasonable to posit that astute Hungarians were aware of this, yet the hope in America as a potential savior persisted until the advent of the Great Depression. During the 1930s, this hope was transformed into an unrealistic fantasy. Such expectations are inevitably disappointed.

⁷¹William R. Castle, Jr. to Joshua Butler Wright, November 15, 1929, *ibid.*

⁷²William R. Castle, Jr. to Joshua Butler Wright, September 30, 1930, *ibid.*

⁷³Joshua Butler Wright to William R. Castle, Jr., October 11, 1930, *ibid.*

⁷⁴*Pesti Napló*, September 27, 1930; *Magyarország*, September 27, 1930; *Pesti Napló*, October 17, 1930.

With the departure of Butler Wright, another chapter of unfulfilled Hungarian aspirations was brought to a close. His role as a career diplomat did not alter the relationship between the two countries. On the Hungarian side, it remained a source of hope, while on the American side, it continued to be a relatively disinterested stance. The advent of the Great Depression further estranged the United States from Europe. Butler Wright's successors in the 1930s, Nicholas Roosevelt and John Flournoy Montgomery, were compelled to represent Washington under altered circumstances, when economic survival was the paramount concern. The tragedy of Hungary was that as both the United States and Great Britain proved unwilling to come to the country's aid in the most outstanding question of all, namely the revision of the Trianon Treaty, Hungary gravitated toward Germany in the 1930s. The consequences of this were catastrophic.

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