

THE HUNGARIAN BEER HALL PUTSCH
THE SZEMERE–BOBULA–ULAIN COUP PLAN, 1923



History

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Abstract

The years following World War One belonged to a crisis period when political extremities strengthened throughout Europe. In Hungary, it was also the peak of the radical right wing, and some radical political circles even planned coups d'état against the conservative government that was working on the political consolidation of Hungary. A group of radical right-wing politicians led by Member of the Parliament Ferenc Ulain who had been in confidential contact with German radical right-wing movements and politicians (Adolf Hitler and General Erich Ludendorff among them) decided to execute a takeover attempt in 1923, with the help of Bavarian paramilitary movements, harmonizing their plans with the Munich Beer Hall Putsch being in preparation. The present research article makes an attempt to reconstruct this strange chapter of Hungarian political history.

Although domestic policy of Hungary was fully determined by British and French interests after the signing of the Peace Treaty of Trianon, secret negotiations with radical right-wing German and Austrian organizations, which went back to 1919, continued for a time in 1921 and 1922 with less intensity than before. The Bethlen Government continued to maintain moderate contacts with German radical right-wing politicians, including former Bavarian Premier and later Commissioner General Gustav von Kahr, General Erich Ludendorff and Adolf Hitler, who was then an emerging and very ambitious young far-right politician in Munich, the centre of the German radical right-wing movements. In the spring of 1922, Prime Minister Bethlen sent the influential politician Miklós Kozma, then the director of the Hungarian Telegraph Office to Munich to negotiate and gather information and to revive Bavarian-Hungarian political relations, which had been declining since the end of 1921.¹ Kozma also personally negotiated with General Ludendorff, a leader of the German radical right about a possible Bavarian-Hungarian cooperation initiative, in which the Hungarian Government circles would have bought weapons from Germany, for example. The German general complained to him that his political influence had recently declined considerably within the Weimar Republic, and even within Bavaria, the centre of the radical right, and that there was such a great disunity among Bavarian right-wing politicians that they essentially did not agree with each other on anything.² Bethlen, informed by Miklós Kozma and Gyula Gömbös, chairman of the *Hungarian Defence Force Association* (MOVE) and a prominent politician of the Hungarian radical right (who was then still a member of the governing party), concluded that the Hungarian Government could not hope for any useful cooperation with the Bavarians, and negotiations on such cooperation were temporarily

¹ Mária Ormos, *Egy magyar médiavezér. Kozma Miklós*, 110–113.

² Ormos, op. cit. 112.

suspended.³ Behind the negotiations, the name of the then very influential secret military organization, the Double Cross Blood Union was involved, since among others, Colonel Tihamér Siménfalvy, the head of the organisation was one of the influential figures on the Hungarian Government side who had previously encouraged the maintenance of lively relations with the Bavarian and Austrian far-right movements.⁴

As we have mentioned, from 1922 onwards, Bethlen's consolidation policy led to a decline in attempts of cooperation between the Hungarian Government and the German-Austrian far-right organizations. At the same time, the nationalist-irredentist organizations, which were increasingly opposed to the Hungarian government, though sometimes united with it in common interests, especially the then still influential Association of Awakening Hungarians which had considerable political influence and a large number of members, and the radical circles of military officers that were also part of its leadership, continued to actively seek international cooperation with organizations on a similar ideological platform. In 1921 the Awakening Hungarians represented the Hungarian radical right in the international anti-Semitic congress in Vienna where the possibility of forming an International Anti-Semitic League was raised.⁵

The first years of consolidation continued to be characterized by a social and economic situation that was very favourable of political extremism. Several political groupings also played on the idea of attempted coups and violent takeovers. The failed revisionist right-wing alliance, the White Internationale dreamed up by Ludendorff was the predecessor of such an adventurous and essentially frivolous coup plan, which nevertheless attracted great political and press attention, and was put forward by Dr. Béla Szemere, a surgeon and hospital director, the used-to-be commander of the auxiliary police militia known as the *National Organisation of State Security Agents* (*Állambiztonsági Megbízottak Szervezete*, shortened as *ÁBM*) (by then under the control of the National Labour Protection, a right-wing workers' militia under the supervision of the State Police), Hungarian-born American architect Titusz Bobula, and Dr. Ferenc Ulain, a lawyer and race-defending member of the National Assembly who had left the governing United Party and was the confidant of Gyula Gömbös, the leading politician of the Hungarian far-right movements. Given that the three men planned to overthrow the Bethlen Government, which they believed to be excessively liberal, pro-Entente and pro-Jewish, by force with the armed support of the German National Socialist movement led by Hitler and General Ludendorff, carrying out their plans at roughly the same time as the Beer Hall Putsch, making their action dependent on its success, their coup plan is perhaps most aptly should be named the plan of the Hungarian Beer Hall Putsch. Ironically, the headquarters of the Association of Awakening Hungarians was located in Sörház Street – the name of which in English roughly means Beer Hall Street.

³ Ormos, op. cit. 113.

⁴ Nándori, *A Marseilles-i gyilkosság nemzetközi jogi vonatkozásai*, 24–25.

⁵ Ungváry, *A Horthy-rendszerkérdése*, 111.

The preparations for the strange coup plan must have begun sometime in early August 1923, when a young German man named Friedrich Fritz Döhmel appeared in Budapest, claiming to be a representative of the Hitler-Ludendorff-led Bavarian National Socialist movement and the closely allied paramilitary organisation Kampfbund, and approached several Hungarian far-right organizations and public figures with various seemingly credible German-language letters of recommendation. One of Döhmel's first trips, whose motives were not entirely clear, was to the headquarters of the Association of Awakening Hungarians, which had previously maintained good relations with the Bavarian nationalists, where he wanted to meet members of the organizations leadership. He got to one of the associations leaders, Lieutenant Colonel PálPrónay, but Prónay did not believe the German young man's claims. However, Döhmel did not give up, and he finally reached Titusz Bobula, a wealthy Hungarian-born architect who had returned from the United States of America and who held a confused radical right-wing perspective, and his friend, Dr. Béla Szemere, a medical doctor and hospital director, and his circle. Szemere, as the de facto commander of the above mentioned State Security Agents militia, which continued to operate with some intensity, and Bobula who provided financial support to the Hungarian far-right had been thinking for some time about how to remove the Bethlen Government, but their activities were limited to planning. It is not clear from the available sources exactly when Döhmel contacted them, but it is likely that he was in contact with members of the radical right-wing association of the Hungarian Cultural League led by Szemere as early as August 1923.⁶

It seems, however, that Döhmel approached Bobula who rented a suite in the Hotel Gellért at the end of October 1923, and Bobula almost immediately he called Szemere to him as well. This may not have been the first time that Szemere and Döhmel met, but in any case it was at this time that the Hungarian parties believed that Döhmel was indeed an agent of the Bavarian nationalist organisation, who was visiting Hungary to make concrete arrangements for cooperation with similar Hungarian far-right formations. Negotiations began in German, and Bobula translated what Döhmel said to Szemere who did not speak German. Döhmel asked how many people Szemere as former commander of the State Security Agents could call to arms in the event of a takeover attempt. Szemere replied that although the State Security Agents had not previously been set up for the purpose of conspiring against the state, there would certainly be some people willing to join the cause. There is also contradictory information about whether the majority of the members of the State Security Agents had previously surrendered their anti-riot service weapons, but it is certain that the Szemere were not backed by a serious armed force, and could have fielded at most only a few hundred men with handguns. Soon afterwards, the race-defending MP Dr. Ferenc Ulian was involved into the plotting, since he himself had long been in contact with Bavarian nationalist organizations, including a close acquaintance with Hitler, and he also gave credence to the claims made by Fritz Döhmel. On Döhmel's initiative, the parties also drew up a treaty German on how the Bavarian state (which was to be established as an independent state that would separate from Germany) and the Hungarian state (which would be led by a new, radical right-wing government after the removal of the Bethlen Government) could cooperate in the

⁶ HU-BFL-VII-18-d-1923-03/0610. Ferenc Ulian and his associates' trial.

realization of their irredentist and anti-Semitic aims. The document was drafted in German by Döhmel himself and dealt with political, military and agricultural issues in eleven articles and three annexes. The essence of the document was that the newly created Bavarian state would recognize the newly created Hungarian state with its borders of 1914, before the beginning of the First World War and the signing of the Trianon Peace Treaty, and that the contracting states would do everything possible to help each other militarily. In particular, they decided to send forces against the Little Entente Czechoslovakia and provide military assistance to each other if either Bavaria or Hungary were attacked by the Czechoslovakians. The treaty was signed on 5 November by Szemere, Bobula and Ulain, and was scheduled to be signed in Munich by Ludendorff and Hitler on the German side. Ferenc Ulain otherwise knew exactly what was being prepared in Bavaria, how and especially when the the Bavarian far-right organizations, independently of Fritz Döhmel, and he envisaged the possible overthrow of the Hungarian Government in close coordination with the Munich beer coups. If Fritz Döhmel may have been an impostor/agent provocateur who may never previously have been in contact with Bavarian revolutionary organizations in the way he claimed to be a phantasmagorical Hungarian conspirator, Ulain's previous negotiations and information may have told him certain things. It is therefore worth examining the Bavarian Beer Hall Putsch / Hitler-Ludendorff coup at least for a few sentences, so that we can place the activities of the Szemere-Bobula-Ulain group with all its absurdity and frivolity in international context.

As Ulain later confessed before the State Police, he had already held talks with Hitler and Ludendorff in the summer of 1923. Bavaria which had a high degree of autonomy within the Weimar Republic as a federal state was at this time in a very turbulent political situation with a devastated economy and social discontent that favored extremist political formations. These included the NSDAP that is, the National Socialist German Workers Party, and its close allies, the paramilitary Kampfbund that mainly consisted of veterans. Political power was exercised by the former Bavarian Prime Minister Kahr who at the time was a Commissioner of the German Federal Government with provisory powers and had been given a mandate to solve the political and economic problems, together with Colonel Hans von Seisser, the commander of the Bavarian Police and General Otto von Lossow, the Reichswehr's district commander in Bavaria. The representatives of the executive who exercised special powers to solve the crisis were ideologically not very far from the political extremists and the group led by Hitler and General Ludendorff, but they would have sought to make political capital out of the crisis by excluding the National Socialists.⁷

Hitler and Ludendorff feared that although Bavaria had been taken over by nationalist politicians, they would be ignored. That is why in early November 1923 they organized a coup d'état and tried to seize power by force. The so-called Beer Hall Putsch began in the Bürgerbräukeller, the Munich beer hall where Gustav von Kahr was addressing a speech to his supporters, and where Hitler and his armed men stormed in on the evening of 8 November and

⁷ Mária Ormos, *Hitler*, Budapest, T-Twins Kiadó, 1994, 73–86.

declared the arrest of the politicians in power. To demonstrate the seriousness of the situation, the building was surrounded by some 600 armed SA-militiamen under the command of Captain Ersnt Röhm, and Commissioner Kahr, under the threat of armed force, assured Hitler and his men of his support. Hitler, a politician with truly outstanding oratory skills, made an incendiary speech at the same venue, and within moments had persuaded the thousands of people gathered in the beer hall to stand by his side. The National Socialist militia then mounted an operation to seize Munich's main government buildings and public facilities, and later that night, Hitler and his men, believing they no longer needed Kahr and his associates, released the Commissioner.⁸

The Nazi Party's free troops were rioting on the streets, but the coup attempt had the very serious shortcoming that the police did not stand by and support the Nazis at all. On the following morning, 9 November, Hitler and his gunmen took the Bavarian Provincial Government hostage, and at the suggestion of General Ludendorff a march of 2,000 men set out to occupy the building of the Bavarian Ministry of Defence, but at the Odeonplatz in Munich Hitler and his militiamen were confronted by the armed forces loyal to Gustav von Kahz and the Federal Government, and a gunfight broke out. Sixteen coup fighters and four policemen were fatally wounded in the clash, and Hitler and the coup leaders fled the scene. It was here that it became clear that the coup attempt miserably failed, and Hitler was arrested by the police within a few days.⁹

The future German dictator was eventually sentenced to five years in prison for treason, while General Ludendorff, a great and highly respected hero of the First World War, was acquitted of all charges despite his leading role in the Beer Hall Putsch. Partly thanks to his growing popularity, Hitler himself spent only nine months in prison and wrote his memoirs *Mein Kampf – My Struggle*. The attempted coup made Hitler a nation widely renowned and popular politician in the longer term, and ten years later, in 1933 he was constitutionally elected Chancellor of Germany, but soon became a bloodthirsty dictator.¹⁰

Although the Bavarian beer coup, just like the Hungarian beer coup which had a much less serious background and was essentially devoid of armed forces, miserably failed, both – probably closely related – far-right political actions already pointed out in the first half of the 1920s, what crises and traumas that were at work in the societies of the states that had lost the First World War, and foreshadowed the subsequent, seemingly unstoppable rise of political extremism in the 1930s.

As for the Hungarian putschists, Ferenc Ulain left by train on the eve of the Munich beer coup as planned, but never made it to Munich, so he was unable to meet the Bavarian nationalist politicians who were preparing for the beer coup. At Hegyeshalom, on the Austro-Hungarian border, he was stopped by the police, told that the Hungarian authorities were aware of the plot and confiscated the documents addressed to. Ulain was not detained on the grounds of his immunity as a member of the Parliament, but was kindly asked to visit the Budapest police the

⁸ Ormos, op. cit. ibid.

⁹ Ormos, op. cit. ibid.

¹⁰ Ormos, op. cit. 196–321.

next day, where he was already arrested. Shortly afterwards, Dr. Béla Szemere and Titusz Bobula were also detained by the detectives.

It became clear to the Hungarian conspirators that the coup plan had not escaped the attention of the police, and archival sources make it clear that the authorities had been monitoring the group's activities for weeks when Ulain travelled to Munich. As already mentioned, Fritz Döhmel appeared in Budapest in August 1923 as a lobbyist for the Bavarian-German National Socialist organisation. The details of his stay in Budapest between August and October are unclear, but it seems certain that he was not the only representative of the Bavarian National Socialists in Budapest at this time. In fact, in the autumn of 1923, the police arrested no fewer than fifty-seven young German men in the Hungarian capital who, as agents of the Hitler-Ludendorff-led organisation had letters of recommendation addressed to the Association of Awakening Hungarians. Several of these German lobbyists were arrested and expelled from Hungary.

Szemere, Bobula and Ulain were eventually suspected and charged with forming an alliance to incite rebellion. The case of MP Ferenc Ulain's immunity was discussed also by the Parliaments Committee on Immunity in the last days of November 1923, and a thorough investigation was carried out. The race-defending MPs led by Gyula Gömbös sought to excuse Ulain and his associates and emphasized their opinion that Ulain and his associates were victims of an agent provocateur hired by the police, and they made accusations primarily against the bourgeois liberal representative whose aim, they claimed, was to openly discredit the race-defending politicians. On 24 January 1924, the Royal Criminal Court of Budapest conceived the first-instance verdict in the case, sentencing all three defendants to one month and fourteen days in prison. The defendants were released in December 1923 and their sentences were deemed to have been completed in arrest. They exercised their right of appeal, and they were acquitted by the court of appeal shortly afterwards.¹¹

Although Béla Szemere, Titusz Bobula and Ferenc Ulain were eventually found innocent by the Hungarian Supreme Court even of the relatively mild charge of forming an alliance to rebel, the coup attempt they planned with Bavarian-German collaboration was undoubtedly frivolous precisely because it was no more than a mere plot, but it caused a major political scandal in 1923-1924. Furthermore, it raises many questions up to this day. The largest question mark is, of course, the identity and motives of Fritz Döhmel, the young German man who approached the coup plotters and tricked them into it, presumably to mislead everyone. The historical literature on the Szemere-Bobula-Ulain conspiracy is generally of the opinion that Fritz Döhmel was probably nothing more than an agent provocateur hired by the Bethlen Government to use him to discredit and politically isolate Gyula Gömbös's far-right race-defending group of MPs that left the governing party,¹² or historians are content with the even simpler explanation that Döhmel was in fact an agent of Hitler and his associates and that there was some real connection between the

¹¹ HU-BFL-VII-18-d-1923-03/0610.

¹² Lajos Serfőző, *A titkostársaságok és a konszolidáció 1922–1926-ban*, Acta Universitatis Szegediensis de Attila József Nominatae. Acta Historica, Tomus LVII, 1976, 3–60, 17–27.; Prónay, op. cit. 210.

German and Hungarian far-right organizations¹³ Even in the international literature, the Hungarian beer coup appears at the level of mention, and academic works written in foreign languages usually treat it as a *fait accompli* that there was a cooperation agreement between the Hungarian and German sides.¹⁴ Döhmel is referred to in various works as a diplomat, and agent, a swindler, an international adventurer and an agent provocateur, but since the works that mention the coup plan at all mostly do not discuss the Hungarian Beer Hall Putsch in any great detail, nor do they really refer to its archival sources, they do not shed light on the apparent contradictions. It is undoubtedly true that Ferenc Ulain and the race-defending faction of MPs leaving the governing United Party which not much later became a party itself caused relative inconvenience to the Bethlen Government which was working on consolidation by the disclosure of numerous corruption cases connected to the Government. Ulain himself had interpellated in the Parliament on several occasions on various corruption cases, thereby discrediting Bethlen's Government.¹⁵

Some senior government officials including Interior Minister Iván Rakovszky were bribed with free shares, and several state officials appeared to be implicated in the corruption case.¹⁶ In the summer of 1923, the Hungarian General Credit Bank granted gift shares to several government and opposition MPs for a total of about 300 million koronas, and they also seriously violated speculation rules.¹⁷ Even under pressure from the ruling party, Justice Minister Emil Nagy refused to cover up the case and ordered the Prosecutors Office under his ministry to launch a serious investigation. This case was partly responsible for his resignation from the Ministry of Justice shortly afterwards in 1924, and his relations with Prime Minister Bethlen also deteriorated. Ulain personally had a great deal to do with the breakout of one of the biggest corruption scandals of the Horthy Era, which did not directly cause a government crisis, but discredited the Bethlen Government to some degree and led to a major press campaign against it. It may have been Bethlen's interest to discredit the race-defending MPs led by Gömbös, including Ulain Ferenc, but based on the archival sources it is doubtful that Döhmel was simply an agent provocateur hired by the Hungarian Government for this purpose, and nothing more.

If we look closely at the testimony of Imre Hetényi, the deputy police commissioner investigating the case, the report sent to the Budapest police commissioner and the testimony of Detective Inspector Jenő Seibold, it becomes clear that Fritz Döhmel was probably in Budapest

¹³ Mária Ormos, *Kozma Miklós. Egy magyar médiavezér*, 113; Ungváry, op. cit. 111.; Romsics, op. cit. 128.; *Iratok az ellenforradalom történetéhez 1919–1945. II. A fasiszta rendszer kiépítése Magyarországon 1921–1924*, 7–120, 110.; József Zakar, *Fajvédők az 1920-as évek Magyarországon*, in *Tanulmányok a Holokausztról V.*, ed. Randolph L. Braham, Budapest, Balassi Kiadó, 2011, 52–111, 89.

¹⁴ Béla Bodó, *The White Terror. Antisemitic and Political Violence in Hungary, 1919–1921*, London, Routledge, 2019, 301.; Thomas L. Sakmyster, *Hungary's Admiral on Horseback. Miklós Horthy, 1918–1944*, Washington, Columbia University Press, 1994, 132–134; David King, *The Trial of Adolf Hitler. The Beer Hall Putsch and the Rise of the Nazi Germany*, London–New York, W. W. Norton and Company, 2017, 118–119.

¹⁵ Ungváry, *A Horthy-rendszermérlege*, 112.

¹⁶ Dezső Nemes, *Az ellenforradalom története Magyarországon 1919–1921*, 108–109.

¹⁷ *Iratok az ellenforradalom történetéhez 1919–1945. II. A fasiszta rendszer kiépítése Magyarországon 1921–1924*, 326–328.

and was seeking contacts with Hungarian far-right organisations as a representative of Hitler's Bavarian nationalist movement before his activities came to the attention of the police. Döhmel did indeed become an agent of the Hungarian political police for a short time, as Döhmel and Hetényi confessed the same. Döhmel reported to the authorities and some members of the Government on the activities of the conspirators, mainly in the hope of gaining financial benefits, but initially he seems to have sought contact with them independently, without the knowledge or involvement of the Hungarian authorities. There are also indications that Döhmel was indeed acting as an agent of the German radical right-wing political forces, but that he had already reported to the German state authorities in August 1923 that the Bavarian radical right was preparing to enter into serious international cooperation with its Hungarian counterparts.¹⁸

We may ask the question whether it is possible that a strange situation could have arisen in which the political investigative department of the Hungarian police and Iván Rakovszky, the Minister of the Interior would have recruited a person who was apparently a native German speaker to act as a mole for the conspirators, by the authorities conspiratorially pretended that they had only learned of his activities later, after Döhmel had already incited the Szemere-Bobula-Ulain group, which really wanted to overthrow the Government, to some degree of action. Would the police have conspiratorially produced documents largely for internal use which prove that Döhmel had initially acted independently of them and only later cooperated with the authorities, even though he had been a hired provocateur for the state authorities from the beginning? The answer is, of course, this is possible, but hardly likely or realistic.

It is also possible that Fritz Döhmel may have been recruited by another Hungarian state agency, at the highest order of the Bethlen Government, and in the greatest secrecy, for example by the military secret service, the Department 2 of the General Staff of the Ministry of Defence, which was operating under secrecy at the time because of the restrictions of armament on Hungary, to discredit Ferenc Ulain and his associates with a conspiracy that he himself had practically incited them to pursue, but the likelihood of this is also very small. The idea sounds impossible and irrational because, if the sources are to be believed, Döhmel originally approached Béla Szemere and Titusz Bobula who were indeed thinking about the possibility of overthrowing the Government completely independently of Döhmel, and Ulain as an MP with some political influence and a person with real links to Bavarian nationalist circles was only involved in the conspiracy somewhat later. That is, when Döhmel contacted Szemere and Bobula, there is a good chance that he did not know that Ferenc Ulain would soon become a key figure in the conspiracy. In fact, it seems that Döhmel was not originally the agent of the Hungarian Government, but acted independently, it is not known exactly on whose behalf, and only later did he start reporting to the political police.

¹⁸ PA-AA-(B)-R 30531-Bd. 1. Cited by: István Németh, *Némethaditengerészetiélgügylépések a versailles-ibékeszerződés kijátszására a weimariköztársaság (1919–1933) éveiben*, Acta Academiae Agriensis. Sectio Historiae, 2017/XLIV, 523–534.

It is also possible that Fritz Döhmel was originally an agent of the Bavarian nationalist organizations – it seems the most likely scenario –, but later he became self-employed man and literally sold out the conspiracy and the information he possessed, primarily for financial gain, while at the same time, he was trying to magnify the activities of the conspirators to suit his own interests. The contradictions in his repeated testimonies, the almost laughable elements in which he said, for example, that although he was originally linked to the German far-right, but as for his political beliefs he were in fact an idealistic communist and philo-Semite, and that he had exposed the radical right-wing conspirators in order to prevent the violent anti-Semitic acts they were allegedly planning also suggest that he may have been motivated by financial gain.¹⁹ On the other hand, he deliberately sought to create as a large scandal as possible and confuse everyone as much as possible.

However, the first instance judgment of the Royal Criminal Court of Budapest conceives interestingly, saying that Döhmel's identity is a mystery even to the Hungarian state authorities, and although it is likely that the circles behind him are to be sought abroad, they are certainly not in Bavaria, and Döhmel badly misled both the participants in the Hungarian Beer Hall Putsch and the Hungarian authorities.²⁰ Abroad but not in Bavaria could also mean – although we do not have to agree with the criminal court in the absence of written evidence – that the mysterious young man in question was an agent of the secret services of a foreign state who was instructed to try to sabotage the attempts of cooperation between German and Hungarian far-right organizations and to discredit them in the eyes of each other.

If we allow ourselves to speculate, we could ask the logical question of which state or states had an interest in preventing the emerging German far-right organizations from building international links during this period. The answer is obvious: France, Austria, or even the Weimar Republic itself. Indeed, in the relatively recent past, in 2009, a French intelligence report was discovered in the custody of the National Archives of France and received some press coverage according to which the French intelligence service had been monitoring the emerging National Socialist leader and his circle, and which painted Hitler as a politician with the oratorical qualities and charisma similar to that of Mussolini.²¹ The same could also be true of the neighboring Little Entente states which also clearly did not want Hungarian political forces to have serious foreign allies for the revisionist ambitions, so they cannot be excluded from such assumptions either.

Furthermore, there was also Austria there that had newly become and independent and as one of the successor states to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was struggling with serious domestic political and economic problems. The crisis after the loss of the First World War provided an excellent breeding ground for political extremism here as well, and the Government faced the real

¹⁹ HU-BFL-VII-18-d-1923-03/610.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Thomas Wieder, *Genre fasciste. Dans les années 1920, Adolf Hitler était surveillé par les services français. La fiche rédigée sur le futur Führer dort dans un armoire des Archives nationales*, Le Monde, 2009. november 20. https://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2009/11/19/adolf-hitler-genre-fasciste_1269349_3214.html

danger that Germany would eventually annex Austria in order to restore the unity of Germany, as the National Socialist German Regime under Hitler really did it fifteen years later in 1938. National Socialist-style, pro-Anschluss movements had already made their appearance here early, and it was therefore not in the interest of the Austrian state that the Hitler-Ludendorff circle should build successful international cooperation with politicians from other nations with similar ideological platforms.²²

Finally, there was the Republic of Weimar itself there, then under the leadership of President Friedrich Ebert and Federal Chancellor Gustav Stresemann, which, as the biggest loser of the First World War, was also struggling with huge economic and social crises as the empire was transformed from a monarchy into a republic. It was precisely these crises and the growing discontent that increased the popularity of demagogic politicians such as Hitler and the National Socialists who professed and promoted extremist ideas. It is certain that the secret services of the Weimar Republic had undercover agents in radical political movements, since it is a little known fact of Hitler's life that he initially came into contact with National Socialism after the defeat of the short-lived Bavarian Soviet Republic in 1919 as an officer of the German army's intelligence and propaganda unit in Bavaria. Hitler's task was to gather information on organizations and individuals propagating political extremism and to carry out vigorous anti-communist propaganda. One such radical right-wing organisation monitored by the German military intelligence service was the then insignificant DAP (Deutsche Arbeiterpartei), the German Workers' Party, which Hitler managed to infiltrate so well that he soon became its leader and, within a few years, had organized it into a nationwide political movement under the name NSDAP, the National Socialist German Workers Party. The predominantly liberal and social democratic Government of the Weimar Republic thus understandably had no interest that the National Socialist movement should build up significant international relations and fought against political extremism within Germany in much the same way as the consolidationist Bethlen Government did in the Hungarian context. There are also indications that Döhmel was in contact with the German state security services as early as August 1923, and that he reported to them that Bavarian and Hungarian far-right organizations were trying to re-establish contact and revive the cooperation that had been initiated earlier.²³ It also seems certain that Döhmel was indeed originally in contact with Hitler and his circle, as a Hungarian detective had followed him to Bavaria on behalf of Deputy Police Commissioner Imre Hetényi and checked if Döhmel had really in connection with National Socialists. Although Hungarian historian István Németh has also published some German diplomatic documents in his extensive source publication in connection with the Ulain case as well, primarily from the correspondence between the Hungarian and German law enforcement and diplomatic services, these do not, of course, reveal the true identity of the key German figure in the conspiracy, Fritz Döhmel. All that is known is that in November 1923, Deputy Police Commissioner Hetényi informed the German embassy in Budapest that Döhmel had been under

²² See: Róbert Fiziker, *Habsburg kontra Hitler. Legitimistákazanschlussellen, azönállóAusztriáért*, Budapest, Gondolat Kiadó, 2010.

²³ PA AA (B)-R 30531-Bd. 1. Cited by: István Németh, *A Wilhelmstrasseés Magyarország.I. rész*, 80.

surveillance by the Hungarian police for some time and that dozens of young German men were in Budapest to initiate a cooperation agreement between the Hungarian and German far-right organizations.²⁴ The scarce German sources of the case reveal that Döhmel's motives were not known to German state authorities, and mention that Gerhard Köpke, an official of the German Foreign Ministry (Auswärtiges Amt) wrote to the Imperial Commissioner for the Supervision of Public Order (Reichskommissar für die Überwachung der Öffentlichen Ordnung) and asked information of him about the case. A few days later, the Foreign Ministry sent a summary of the case to the representative of the German Federal Government in Munich, requesting further information, in particular on the links between Hungarian and German radical right-wing organizations. However, the German Imperial Commissioner for the Supervision Public Order, who was practically the head of the German federal political police service interestingly confused the issue even further by not providing the Foreign Ministry with any relevant information, and in his reply expressed the opinion that Fritz Döhmel had really no connection with the National Socialists, and, referring to a rather unreliable press source, the daily titled *Germania* of 25 November 1923, claimed that he was in fact a Communist.²⁵ Although this is all in the realm of conjecture, it cannot be excluded that Fritz Döhmel, among his other motives and activities, possibly in conjunction with his earlier actual National Socialist involvement, was an agent of the German secret service whose aim was to disrupt the activities of the National Socialists, especially their international relations, and that the German political police and secret services were therefore not interested in exposing his true identity.

Although Hitler also issued a press statement in the Hungarian far-right newspaper called *Szózat* in which he categorically denied that Döhmel was his or his party's agent, and all of this was also stressed by National Socialist leaders Alfred Rosenberg and Anton Drexler, this proves absolutely nothing.²⁶ Hitler had just been arrested for an unsuccessful coup attempt, and he did not want to add to his already difficult situation by admitting that he would have wanted to carry out the Bavarian Beer Hall Putsch with some international involvement if it had been possible or that he would have interfered in the internal affairs of another states if it had been successful. That is, Döhmel may well have been in contact with the Hitler-Ludendorff circle in some way, as his knowledge of the Bavarian domestic political situation and his ability to convince Ferenc Ulain who was indeed in contact with Hitler would suggest. Fritz Döhmel's unusually high level of education and diplomatic skills may also be indicated by the fact that, according to the conspirators' testimonies, he put his somewhat absurd but nevertheless professional draft treaty about the Bavarian-Hungarian political cooperation on paper without drafting.

²⁴ PA-AA-(B)-R-30531-Bd. 1. István Németh, *Magyarok és németek*, 384; *A Wilhelmstrasseés Magyarország. Német diplomáciai iratok Magyarországról (1918–1934).I. kötet. Az 1920-as évek*, 346.

²⁵ István Németh, *Magyarok és németek (1914–1934)*, 385.

²⁶ [Anonymous author], *Hitler nyilatkozata az Ulain-ügyben. Sohasem akart beavatkozni a magyar ügyekbe Döhmel, köpenicki diplomata*, *Szózat*, 23. 12. 1923., 7.

While it is also possible that Döhmel was a simple swindler driven purely by the prospect of financial gain, his high-level disinformation activities with which he deceived the conspirators themselves as well as politicians and policemen may suggest an international intelligence game in the background.

Of course, Fritz Döhmel's true identity will probably never be completely known, even after almost a hundred years, so we can only rely on what seems to be logical theories. Whatever the truth about the Hungarian Beer Hall Putsch is, it is certain that, like the much more serious Bavarian Beer Hall Putsch, it failed from the very beginning. The White Internationale between the radical right-wing forces under General Ludendorff's leadership did not come into being, and just as the German federal government succeeded in marginalizing the extreme right for a time, so by the end of 1923 the Bethlen Government had succeeded in isolating Gömbös and his circle in parliament and in marginalizing to some extent their political activities which were dangerous to consolidation.

However, it is ironic and at the same time somewhat frightening that the representatives of the Hungarian far-right sought contact with the German politician who was not taken too seriously at the time, and was even considered ridiculous by many, and expected him to help them realize their own political legacy who less than twenty years later, became the most notorious, mass-murdering dictator of the 20th century. It is perhaps an exaggeration to say such a thing, but nevertheless, the Hungarian Beer Hall Putsch, this attempted coup which at the time seemed so ridiculous somehow foreshadowed and predestined Hungary's mournful political and military involvement in the 1940s and its becoming one of Nazi Germany's most loyal allies in the Second World War. Interestingly, on an individual level, the same could be said of the Hungarian leader of the 1923 conspiracy: Ferenc Ulain who began his political career in the United Party and later was the MP of the Race-defending and Peasant Parties, finally joined the Arrow Cross Party led by Ferenc Szálasi in the 1940s, which, in the final months of the war, staged a coup with German help and brought to power a pro-German puppet government, causing enormous losses to a country that had already evidently lost the war.

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