

**Lóránd Eötvös University  
Faculty of Arts  
Doctoral School of History**

**Gábor Péterfi**

**THE VIEWS OF DEZSŐ SZABÓ AND GÉZA FÉJA ON THE  
TREATY OF TRIANON AND FOREIGN POLICY**

**Doctoral thesis (PhD) review**

**Supervisor: Dr Pál Pritz  
University Professor**

**Budapest, 2009**

## I. The Background and the Justification of the Research Topic

The trauma of the Treaty of Trianon is still a very sensitive issue in Hungarian history. It has been regarded as a neuralgic even of our history since 1920. The primary reason for the rejection of the Trianon Treaty certainly lies in the unprincipled and rough territorial demands. The Hungarian treatment of this trauma, *inter alia*, played a major role in this turmoil. In Hungary there was a political consensus concerning the rejection of this dictated peace treaty, which was signed on 4 July, 1920 and ratified by the national convention on 31 July, 1920. The leading elite of the Horthy-era considered it as an unjust historical accident that is why their only response to it could be an integrating revisionist programme, deriving from the total rejection of the treaty. Between the two world wars Saint Stephen's conception of the state represented most perfectly the restoration programme of Hungary.

In the first twenty five years after the treaty there occurred voices with regard to the restoration of historic Hungary that were different from the official position. Since the signing of the treaty, the national social democrats, the minor camp of the bourgeoisie and the 'popular' (népi) movement formulated dissent views. The writers of the 'popular' movement formed a loose grouping. As a common characteristic, turning against the elite, autotelic urban culture, their novels dealt with the everyday lives of the poor peasants. They did not only intend to depict their lives but to draw the attention of the public to social problems. Consequently, most of the 'popular' writers were actively involved in politics. Disagreeing with the integrationist revisionist policy, which in broad terms viewed the future of the country in alliance with the great powers, they were looking for a unique Hungarian or Eastern European way, providing a solution to the vital national problems.

Rózsa Varga and Sándor Patyi rather focused on the bibliographical aspects of the history of the Hungarian 'popular movement' but less concentrated on the actual analysis. The thematic chapters of the Varga-Patyi bibliography presented a huge amount of material until the 1960s, which considerably helped my research on the foreign policy currents of my theme. However, some articles touching upon foreign policy were omitted from this bibliography, which were identified during my press research.

Géza Juhász in his *Népi írók* provided the first account of the 'popular' literature in 1942. Gyula Bodrándi provided the most comprehensive history of the 'popular' movement originally written for a German reading public. Since Bodrándi's book, entitled *A magyar népi mozgalom*, Konrád Salamon's works - *A Márciusi Front, Utak a Márciusi Front felé, A harmadik út kísérlete, A harmadik út küzdelme. Népi mozgalom 1947-1987* - enriched our understanding of the movement. Juhász' volume (*Uralkodó eszmék Magyarországon 1939-1944*) summarizes the disputes of the intelligentsia during the Second World War, whereas Péter Sz. Nagy's book (*A népi-urbánus vita dokumentumai 1932-47*) does so on the beginning of the 'popular'-urban opposition. Benkő Péter analysed the biographies of the members of the people movement. Gyula Gombos as a member of the movement published a volume (*A harmadik út*) on the "third way" policy. Magda K. Nagy and Ágnes Széchenyi wrote two monographs on the crucial journal (*Válasz*) of the people's movement.

It can be said about these works that they do not provide a comprehensive analysis of Dezső Szabó's and the other members' of the people's movement attitude to foreign policy and the Trianon Treaty. In recent conferences on this movement (*A népi mozgalom és a magyar társadalom – Tudományos tanácskozás a szárszói találkozó 50. évfordulója alkalmából; Bal, jobb, harmadik út. „De mi a népiesség...”*) it is only Sándor Balogh who dealt with the popular writers views on foreign policy, where he analysed Dezső Szabó and László Németh's writings but most importantly the second Szárszó meeting (1943) from the perspective of foreign policy.

The analysis of Dezső Szabó and Géza Féja's writings were greatly eased two thorough bibliographies on each author compiled by Sándor Balogh Budai and Ferenc Balogh. Furthermore, Péter Nagy and Gyula Gombos wrote two monographs on the life of Dezső Szabó. Considering the paucity of a comprehensive work on the primary sources, one may find Zoltán Szűcs work (*Az elsodort író - In memoriam Szabó Dezső*) as well as Gáspár Gróh's essay collection (*Szabó Dezső: Tanulmányok, esszék*). A volume (*Az egész látóhatár*), originally published in 1930 and then in 1991, contains several essays on his views on foreign policy.

No monograph has been published on the life of Géza Féja, so in my thesis I used Péter Benkő's relevant work on the almanac of Hungarian writers. It was Endre Féja who published most of his father's autobiographical writings (*Szabadcsapat, Bölcsődal, Lapszélre*), articles as well as personal correspondence.

My research theme can be justified by the fact that on the one hand Dezső Szabó's reflection on the Trianon Treaty is an unexplored area of research, on the other that despite his metaphorical concepts, he is regarded as one of the most influential political thinkers in the twentieth century. I started to explore Dezső Szabó's political views under the guidance of Ignác Romsics, who was the supervisor of my MA (2000) thesis at the University of Szeged. Then under the supervision of Pál Pritz I continued my research, extended to the 'popular authors', at the Doctoral School of History, Lóránd Eötvös University.

The first part of my doctoral thesis investigates Dezső Szabó views on foreign policy. Since Géza Féja, Szabó's disciple, wrote as many papers on foreign political events as all the 'popular writers' together, the second part is devoted to the analysis of his writings. I chose these two influential authors of the 'popular movement' since they often reacted to contemporary foreign political events in different ways. Therefore, we cannot postulate a consensus with regard to foreign policy among the 'popular authors.' Apart from their common anti-German attitude and their confederation idea in some cases, they did not have a comprehensive plan reflecting on the challenges in world politics. In order to contextualize Dezső Szabó's and Géza Féja's reactions to the Treaty of Trianon, we shall present the relevant and related writings of the 'popular authors.' Furthermore, we shall also present their views on the territorial gains of 1938-41, which can be seen as a partial restoration of the pre-Trianon Treaty borders.

## **II. The Aims, Methods and Sources of Research**

It is well known that Dezső Szabó and Géza Féja are (essay-)writers rather than scholars. Consequently, the analysed texts include essays, letters and - in the case of Szabó - novels rather than scholarly articles. As their views on the Treaty of Trianon have not been explored in scholarship, it is inevitable to provide a brief summary of their so far little-known or ignored writings. Not only have I investigated the easily available corpus of Dezső Szabó and Géza Féja including published novels, essays and letters but I have also carried out press research to provide a more complex picture. In doing so, certain totally ignored newspaper articles were discovered in the volumes of the relevant Szeged and Budapest newspapers. Researching the Fejő's bequest in Békéscsaba, I have found manuscripts such as notes and an essay on Dezső Szabó were identified, which are unknown to the scholarly community. The press research has been carried out in University Library of Szeged and the Parliament Library. As for the archival records, we consulted the relevant sources in Országos Széchényi Könyvtár, Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum, Eötvös Kollégium and the Munkácsy Mihály Múzeum in Békéscsaba. I have also made interviews with Gyula Gombos, Mihály Ilia literary historian,

Sándor Püski publisher, Zoltán Szócs, head of the Dezső Szabó Society, as well as Endre Féja, Géza Féja's son.

Before analysing Szabó's views on the Treaty of Trianon, the thesis surveys the major phases of his life and then the following questions will be addressed:

1. What reasons does Szabó think led to the Trianon Treaty?
2. How is he related to the revisionist politics of the Horthy era?
3. How does he view the position of Hungary in Europe after the Treaty of Versailles?
4. What foreign policy does he envisage for Hungary?
5. What solution does he offer for the treatment of minorities?

The major chapters of the thesis are arranged thematically but within them the subchapters usually follow a chronological order.

The second chapter is devoted to the summary of those reasons that paved the way for the Trianon Treaty according to the 'popular authors.' Having presented the biography of Géza Féja in brief, the third chapter focuses on his reflections on the Treaty of Trianon based upon the following principles:

1. Féja's concept of the past, concentrating on the road leading to the Trianon Treaty
2. The analysis of his views on foreign policy
  - a. The exploration of Féja's reactions to the major historical events from Hitler's accession to power to the end of the Second World War
  - b. "Revision, Central-Europe, Confederation" chapter investigates his views on Hungarian foreign policy and his suggested solutions by reconstructing his vision for the future

We conclude our analysis in 1944 in the case of both writers. This is justified on the one hand by the death of Szabó in January, 1945, on the other that Féja's distancing from contemporary literary life as a result of his stay in Békéscsaba between 1945 and 1956. Although he anonymously published articles in *Viharsarok*, edited by Tibor Cseres, but they are not concerned with foreign policy. After 1956 he again participated in public life. The biographical chapter touches upon his role in the revolution.

### III. The Structure of the Thesis

Acknowledgements
Introduction
Review of Primary Sources
Review of Secondary Sources
<b>I. Dezső Szabó's Concept of the Trianon Treaty</b>
<b>I.1. "The Swept Away Writer"</b>
I.1.1. The Swept away village
I.1.2. In the Wake of Revolutions
I.1.3. Starts Raining
I.1.4. The Critic of the Horthy-regime
I.1.5. The Whole Horizon
I.1.6. The Last Years
I.1.7. Funeral and Complications
I.1.8. 1956
I.1.9. The "Soft Dictatorship" and the Emigrants' View on Dezső Szabó

<b>I.2. The Treaty of Trianon and Its Reasons</b>
I.2.1. Oszkár Jászi and Gyula Szekfű on the Disintegration of the Monarchy
I.2.2. 1920
I.2.3. Towards a New Hungarian Ideology
I.2.4. The Reasons for the Treaty in Twelve-Year Perspective
I.2.5. Summary
<b>I.3. Dissenting Opinion on the Revisionist Politics of the Horthy-era</b>
I.3.1. On Legitimacy
I.3.2. The New Enemies: Germans and Slavonians
I.3.3. Help!
I.3.4. External and Internal German Expansion
I.3.5. The Strengthening Germany and the Condemnation of Anti-Judaism
I.3.6. The First Vienna Award
I.3.7. 1940
I.3.8. Summary
<b>I.4. Europe, the Small Nations and the Third Way</b>
I.4.1. Our Place in Europe
I.4.2. Dezső Szabó's Europe
I.4.3. „Our Foreign Policy.... is a Matter of National Policy”
<b>I.5. The Solution: The Collaboration of Eastern European Nations</b>
I.5.1. Suggestion for the Hungarian-Romanian Cooperation
I.5.2. The Idea of an “Eastern-European Federation”
I.5.3. “The Danube Basin, The Collaboration of Eastern European and Balkan Nations”
I.5.4. Dezső Szabó's Impact on the Hungarian Youth of the Former Upper Hungary
I.5.5. “The Road for the Germans”
I.5.6. The Place of Hungary in Europe: Eastern Europe
I.5.7. Confederation and Revision
I.5.8. Intellectual Antecedents
I.5.9. Evaluation and Summary
<b>I.6. The Nationality Problem</b>
I.6.1. The Politics Related to Nationalities Between the Two World Wars
I.6.2. Dezső Szabó Nation-State
I.6.3. What is Hungarian?
I.6.4. The Critique of Bethlen's Politics Concerning Nationalities
I.6.5. Suggestion about Solving the National Problem
I.6.6. Summary
<b>II. The Road to the Treaty of Trianon</b>
<b>II.1. Caravan-Camp Dilemmas</b>
<b>II.2. A The Concept of the Past for the ‘Popular’ Writers</b>
II.2.1. Gyula Illyés
II.2.2. László Németh
II.2.2.1. László Németh's Concept of the Nation
II.2.3. Ferenc Erdei
II.2.4. Péter Veres
II.2.5. Zoltán Szabó
II.2.6. István Bibó
<b>III. Géza Féja's Concept of the Trianon Treaty</b>
<b>III.1. Géza Féja's Career as a Writer</b>

III.1.1. Géza Fėja and Dezső Szabó
<b>III.2. Géza Fėja’s Concept of the Past</b>
III.2.1. Summary
<b>III.3. Evaluation of Foreign Policy</b>
III.3.1. The Years of the Boom
III.3.2. Géza Fėja and legitimacy
III.3.3. From Hitler’s Ascension to Power to the Anschluss
III.3.3.1. Géza Fėja on Austria
III.3.4. During the Second World War
III.3.4.1. On the Soviet-Finnish War
III.3.4.2. Small nations and the World War
III.3.4.3. Géza Fėja Working For the Institute of National Biology
III.3.4.4. German Invasion in Western Europe
III.3.4.5. “Hungarian Way”, Finnish Example
III.3.4.6. Ukraine
III.3.4.7. The Treaty of Trianon and the Second World War
III.3.4.8. The Future of the Small States in Europe
III.3.4.9. Summary
<b>III.4. Danube Confederation and Revision</b>
III.4.1. The Critique of the “Hungarian Capitolium”
III.4.2. Primus inter pares
III.4.3. “The Face of Imperial Germany emerges from behind Hitler’s Slogans“
III.4.4. “Peasant Europe – Peasant Danube Basin”
III.4.5. Literature Spanning Over the Borders”
III.4.5.1. Hungarian-Slovakian-Czech Rapprochement
III.4.5.2. Transylvania
III.4.6. Géza Fėja and the March Front
III.4.6.1. Antecedents
III.4.6.2. 1937
III.4.6.3. 1938
III.4.7. “Political Babel in the Danube Basin”
III.4.8. Reflection on the Territorial Revision
III.4.8.1. The First Vienna Award
III.4.8.1.1. The Antecedents and the Award
III.4.8.1.2. The Reaction
III.4.8.2. Peasantry and Foreign Policy
III.4.8.2.1. György Dózsa
III.4.8.3. The Third Way
III.4.8.4. “Intellectual National Defence”
III.4.8.5. The “Transylvania-Question”
III.4.8.6. The Second Vienna Award
III.4.8.7. The Southern Territorial Expansion
III.4.9. “We cannot have a word in foreign policy”
III.4.10. Lajos Kossuth Danube-Confederation Programme
III.4.11. Géza Fėja’s Contribution at the Second Szárszó Conference
III.4.12. Summary
Bibliography

#### IV. The Findings of the Thesis

The dissertation aimed at providing new insights into the period under investigation, as well as the used sources. As neither Dezső Szabó's reactions to the Treaty of Trianon and to the foreign policy of the Horthy-era, nor those of Géza Féja have been thoroughly investigated so far, and novel sources were identified and used during my research, the findings of the investigation are to be summarized briefly.

After surveying the main novels and the publications of Dezső Szabó, it can be argued that the author traced back the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, thus the fall of Great Hungary, to the following factors:

1. The invasion of foreign settlers since Saint Stephen I., especially since the rule of the Habsburg-dynasty;
2. the unsuccessful Austro-Hungarian compromise;
3. the German oriented foreign policy deriving from the Austro-Hungarian compromise;
4. the extremely submissive minority policy;
5. the exclusively damaging effects of the Hungarian participation in the First World War;
6. the moral and intellectual decline of the traditional Hungarian elite including the aristocracy and the gentry, later the Christian middle-class;
7. the increasing power of the new middle-class of foreign (Jewish and German) at the expense of the Hungarian peasantry;
8. The betrayal of the revolutions following the World War and the absence of a real Hungarian revolution.

Szabó identifies the Austro-Hungarian compromise as the main cause of the collapse of Great Hungary. As far as the compromise is concerned it can be argued that similar to Lajos Kossuth, Dezső Szabó does not take the contemporary circumstances into consideration and condemns the agreement of 1867. This can be explained by his inexperience in the fields of foreign policy, his Hungary-dominated world view, his inability to separate the political and the ideological dimensions, all in all, by the idealization of the sterile interpretation of the independence idea. According to Dezső Szabó, the foreign policy of Austria-Hungary, which was subordinated to the expansive goals of Germany, led directly to the war collapse. Furthermore, it can be observed that Dezső Szabó – in accordance with dominating interpretations of the era – explained the decline of Hungary with internal causes.

The Horthy-era is criticised by the author more sharply than the era of the dual monarchy. Dezső Szabó argues that the restoration of St. Stephen's Hungarian Empire propagated by the ruling elite and much desired and hoped by the public opinion, is impossible, because the minorities seceded from Hungary due to the Treaty of Trianon, do not want to reunite with Hungary. He claims that the restoration of the Habsburg dynasty is even less desirable, since the long reign of the Habsburgs brought only suffering to the Hungarians. By 1923 Dezső Szabó broke with the counter-revolutionary system once and for all and drew the attention to the danger of the German expansion in his writings. From 1927 onwards he firmly opposed the Anschluss and the Mittel-Europa plans endangering the Hungarian independence. According to Szabó, the incitement of the legitimist, irredentist and "anti-Jewish" propaganda serves the interests of Germany after all, which wants to expand its authority in Central Europe. The policy of the Arrow-Cross Party, praising Germany, could only result in the further mutilation of the country, hence he held the Arrow Cross movement in contempt. He argued that only the assurance of neutrality can be the maxim of the Hungarian foreign policy. His critique about the revision of the Treaty of Trianon is balanced and acceptable on the whole.

Accepting the peace treaties between the First World War and the First Vienna Award, Dezső Szabó was looking for a solution for the nations in Central-Europe. He argued that the small Danube nations, endangered by the Soviet and German expansion, could only survive

and develop, if they establish a loose confederation. The new historic collaboration could lead to a close co-operation in fields of militia, foreign policy, economy and culture. While evaluating the Eastern-Europe plan, the European power-relations have to be taken into consideration. Regarding the dominant great-power politics, one may well ask whether there was a need for such a confederation by the great powers in the region between the two world wars. It can be said that winners of the First World War made an effort to establish a confederation from the Baltic states to the Mediterranean to hold up the German/Russian expansion. However, it turned out soon that this planned confederation would not take place, because of the hostility, not only between the winner and defeated nations but also between the winners themselves. Even if it had been formed by force, it would not function.

On the whole, Dezső Szabó's East-European plan can be seen as a utopia of well-intentioned intellectual. A significant element in the author's conception is that considering the interconnections between domestic and foreign politics in their unity, he emphasises the fact that the current foreign policy is always the function of the internal policy, too. In other words, the Hungarians must attract the neighbouring similarly small nations by means of internal reforms. This also means that temporarily suspending its demands deriving from St. Stephen's conception of the greatness of the Hungarian nation, Hungary seeks the possibility of cooperation with the small nations, which are just as exposed to the great powers as Hungary. Szabó argues that the mission of Hungary is not to reclaim its former territories, but instead of the enforcement of the territorial principle, it should obtain the moral power in the Danube basin, which would enable Hungary to establish an alliance. Hence, Hungary must use its moral behaviour and organizing skills to become the „primus inter pares.” This reasoning foreshadows László Németh's „paragon nation” concept.

Furthermore, it should be stressed that the author imagined the cooperation of the Danube nations without the rectification of the borders. As a result, the small nations, involved in this confederation, would take the first step in the process towards the establishment of a united Europe without borders.

Dezső Szabó's and Géza Féja's ways crossed each other in 1923, when Féja, attracted by Szabó, became a contributor to *Aurora*. In the following year, Féja drew off from the founding father of the popular writers movement and approached first Mihály Babits, later on, Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky. The young Féja and the 21 years older Szabó did not become friends. Apart from the large generation gap, Szabó's unaccommodating character played a role in this.

Féja saw the popular writers movement as a ”guerrilla” movement realizing a new programme. Turning against the liberalist interpretation of nation in the dualist era and the dominant concept of nation in the Horthy-era, he made a proposal about a new ‘popular’ nation interpretation. He attempts to reinterpret the past on the basis of this approach.

Akin to Szabó, he highlighted the negative sides of the 400-year Habsburg rule in Hungary. Féja also investigated the causes of the collapse of the Habsburg monarchy, which he explained with internal factors including the atrophy of the organic cementing forces. Similarly to him, the other ‘popular’ writers were looking for solutions to the Hungarian doom problems. It was only Ferenc Erdei that appreciated certain aspects of the period starting with the compromise of 1867, though it must be admitted that he investigated it from an economic perspective, too. Dezső Szabó, László Németh and István Bibó recognized the inevitability of the disintegration of the Monarchy but they did not consider the foreign policy factors leading to the collapse of the empire significant, either. The “German rule” necessitates the collaboration of the “oppressed nations” of the Monarchy.

Féja as a contributor to the newspaper *Hungary* he published several articles on foreign policy. Among other things, he provided a local account of the reactions to the First

Vienna Award. In the 1930s he had misgivings about the German great power politics. His writings in the 1940s and his participation in the Institute of National Biology explain why he was gradually placed on the right side of the political palette. Féja, as a journalist interested in social issues, was amazed by the success of German welfare politics beside the military victories. Following Pál Teleki's policy in the early 1940s, he argued for neutrality and in domestic politics he attacked the extreme right, the social democrats as well as the communists.

In his writings concerning foreign policy, he emphasized the establishment and development of cultural relations with neighbouring countries. From the 1930s he also connected his idea of the confederative structure with the programme of territorial revision. All the while he rejected legitimist politics, and, as for the foreign policy of our country, he, along with Dezső Szabó and László Németh, stressed the importance of the internal renewal

## V. Areas for Further Research

There are several themes mentioned or explored in the thesis, which require further research. With regard to Dezső Szabó's writings on foreign policy, it would be crucial to examine to what extent his writings against Nazism and condemning revision influenced contemporary public views. Based upon the memoirs, one can formulate very diverse responses to this question. Similarly to others, Szabó envisions a unifying Europe via the spiritualization of the borders. Future research has to investigate to what extent the pan-European concept was present in the works of the other 'popular authors.'

It would be important to analyse those writings of the other 'popular authors' which are related to foreign policy and not mentioned in this work. Accordingly, the relevant works of Zoltán Szabó, Péter Veres, Imre Kovács would enrich our understanding of the subject.

It would be necessary to integrate the arguments of those interviews that I conducted between 1999 and 2006; in the present version of the thesis they are used only as background information.

## VI. Related Publications of the Author

### 1. Articles

- "Szabó Dezső és Trianon" In: MEDGYESI Konstantin (szerk.): Kolindárium. A Szent Imre Katolikus Egyetemi és Főiskolai Kollégium Évkönyve. Szeged, Szent Imre Kollégium, 1999. 32-40.

- "Kelet-európai konföderáció mint a revízió alternatívája – Szabó Dezső válasza Trianonra." *Európai Utas*. 12. évf. 2001. 1. sz. 60-63.

- „Szabó Dezső Kelet-Európája” *Kút*. 4. 2005. 2. sz. 84-104.

- „Temetés Rákosi parancsára” *Tiszatáj*. 63. 2009. 1.sz. 77-88.

### 2. Reviews

- Mona Ilona: Slachta Margit. *Magyar Egyháztörténeti Vázlatok*. 12. 2000. 1-4. sz. 499-504.

- „Látni megyek, nem ítélni” (Borbándi Gyula: Két világban – életem és pályám).

*Tiszatáj*. 58. 2004. 3. sz. 78-82.

- István Eördögh, Erdély román megszállása: 1916-1920: olasz és vatikáni források alapján [Romanian Occupation of Transylvania: 1916-1920 Based Upon Italian and Vatican archives] (Szeged: Lazi, 2000). *Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe Reviews*. 1. 2005. Elérhető: <http://rs.as.wvu.edu/peterfi.htm>.

### **3. Interview**

„Arról, hogy magyarok vagyunk, nem mondhatunk le” Beszélgetés Gombos Gyulával Szabó Dezsőről, a kelet-európai összefogás esélyeiről és a harmadik utas gondolatról. *Protestáns Szemle*. 12. 2003. 1. sz. 45-49.