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The Origins and Legacy of World War I

An (Austro-)Hungarian Perspective

For the ordinary soldier, there was probably much less doubt about the personal significance of either the beginning or the end of the First World War regarding the simple question of survival. However, from the political elite's point of view, the Great War (*la Grande Guerre*, as in Western Europe this cataclysm is mostly referred to) had begun long before any single declaration of war was dispatched. For statesmen and diplomats, for all the key persons involved in policy-making, as well as for monarchs and army leaders, the war had indeed begun earlier – just as it did not finally end in the early days of November 1918. As it is pointed out in a very interesting monographic survey on World War One historiography, “because war is not a discrete entity, but something intricately lived, conceptualized, and imagined”.¹ Our interest is actually more likely to be awakened today by the various interpretations of a collective experience, and the different reasons why certain moments and events remained in the focus of retrospective thinking.

One of the purposes of this paper is to give the reader an insight into what could be called a significant and most visible variety of the post-World War One Hungarian “mind-set” influenced by the outbreak, the outcome and the long-term historical impact of the war. This insight is provided through the

¹ Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present* (Cambridge, New York, etc.: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 6.

presentation of the reminiscences of a handful of protagonists and witnesses who felt inclined to write with a more analytical type of approach which is closer to the historian's perspective, and in whose works foreign policy and diplomacy lay in the focus of attention.

Although the choice of authors introduced here may seem somewhat arbitrary at first glance, it is a result of an intention to provide a selection of writings representing a cross section of political attitudes. The simple fact that a handful of authors are picked may arouse legitimate skepticism regarding the title which is suggesting a more generalizing approach. Nevertheless, this paper has the intention to present views and characters which can be called unique with respect to their roles and responsibilities as decision-makers, their political views, personal judgements, or simply because of their impressive remarks highlighting the importance of the historic legacy of the First World War for Hungary.

The main line of discourse after 1918 was largely determined by the war guilt problem, in all its individual and collective implications. Hungary with the experience of defeat and dismemberment could hardly imagine the tragic outcome as a simple and logical consequence of the new international situation at the end of the war. Questions concerning guilt and responsibility were focusing much more on the unsuccessful endgame (or searching for reasons why the collapse came as a result of a long-term historical process), and less on the July Crisis or the outbreak of the war. This is reflected in the monumental French language overview on historical literature and research in Hungary following the Austro-Hungarian Compromise by Tibor Baráth², a young historian and secretary of the International Committee of Historical Sciences. While it

² Tibor Baráth (1906-1992), historian who was greatly in favour of modernizing historical thought in Hungary following modern French schools. Following his return to Hungary, he became a supporter of the extreme right relatively soon, ending up serving the Arrow Cross government in 1944. See: Rudolf Paksa, "A történetírás mint propaganda. Baráth Tibor útja a szaktörténetírástól a mitoszgyártásig," *Kommentár* 5 (2006), 69-79.

provides detailed bibliographic information, it only contains limited commentary. Little is mentioned on the European aspects of Hungary's tragic fate, while special emphasis is laid on the source value of Count István Tisza's wartime correspondence, the "only statesman" opposed to the war.³

After a revolutionary rupture, both Austria and Hungary experienced post-imperial trauma combined with loss of territory and, indeed, a more or less justifiable feeling of the loss of their so-called historic mission (as it had been interpreted in the two imperial halves). By the end of the 1920s, conservative elites strengthened their influence and determined the tone for national remembrance (especially in Hungary), and later, during the interwar period, this was challenged by the far right rather than by any other force in the political spectrum. It seemed difficult to integrate scholarly work in the context of a continental or broader international framework, or to put forward the Austro-Hungarian interpretation of the causes of the war in the form of reminiscences also digestible for a wider public in the English speaking world. The task was all the more difficult as a strong and uncritical feeling of nostalgia for the "good old times" before 1914 continued to prevail.⁴ Pacifist hopes disappeared as the policies of the Entente became clear, and harsh criticism so much present in the November days of 1918, looking bravely into the face of a "fate deserved" ("Verdientes Schicksal", as the title of the leading article in the famous *Arbeiter-Zeitung* of Vienna put it), was not at all typical later. In fact, the breakup of the Dual Monarchy, its disappearance from the map had the far-reaching consequence of the disappearance of a genuinely "Austro-Hungarian" memorization process independent from post-war power relations and the daily political business in the

³ Tibor Baráth, "L'histoire en Hongrie (1867-1935)," *Revue historique* 178 (1936), 126-127.

⁴ Hannes Leidinger, "Historiography 1918-Today (Austria-Hungary)," In *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, March 4, 2016, http://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/historiography_1918-today_austria-hungary

1920s, and set in a more global context.⁵ In this paper, the choice of works was made on the basis of their unique approach, whether memoirs and pamphlets of a more apologetic nature or works marked out for the purpose of historical analysis. In the two decades after the end of World War I, the two purposes were all too often merged into one another.

The “political metaphysics” of missing leadership

The attitude and self-reflection in the writings of Hungarians is with little doubt very different from the attitudes of authors in most of the successor states, including Austria. Hungarians, as did many Austrians, frequently looked at the dissolution of the ‘good old Monarchy’ with considerable bitterness, though the historical turning point of 1918 proved to have a divulging effect in their lamentations over the end phase. Beside the question marks of self-reflection and the ‘ifs’ of history, there remained the need for the justification of past decisions. All this was done not without the intention to find examples of some kind of greatness or heroism on the side of the late Habsburg Empire. Like Alexander Spitzmüller⁶, the last common Finance Minister remembered the character of Emperor Karl IV in a semi-heroic light in the late 1940s. He also weighed the possibility of following a strong-hand policy involving the use of violence which the emperor would not find a plausible option

⁵ Manfred Rauchensteiner: „Reichshaftung: Österreich, Ungarn und das Ende der Gemeinsamkeit,” In *Österreich und Ungarn im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Csaba Szabó, 53-76. (Wien: Institut für Ungarische Geschichtsforschung in Wien–Balassi Institut–Collegium Hungaricum Wien–Ungarische Archivdelegation beim Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv, 2014) 53. 58-59. See the article of Friedrich Austerlitz in a downloadable digital copy of the original pages: April 8, 2016, <http://anno.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/anno?aid=aze&datum=19181105&seite=1&zoom=38>

⁶ *Alexander Spitzmüller* (1862–1953), Austrian lawyer, bank director and politician. He served as the last common Finance Minister of Austria–Hungary from September the 7th to November the 10th 1918. Between 1919 and 1922, he served as Governor of the Austro-Hungarian Bank and was entrusted with its liquidation.

at all, thereby – according to Spitzmüller – opposing quite a few in “ruling circles”. The question, he continued, whether the “attitude” of Karl “was justifiable, belongs to the realm of political metaphysics”, yet Spitzmüller closed his reminiscences with the words of Heinrich von Srbik⁷ (in whose case the fact is not entirely without historical importance that following the Anschluss he became NSDAP representative in the *Großdeutscher Reichstag*) who once told “in Spitzmüller’s presence” that “under such circumstances a sovereign should have iron in his blood”.⁸ In Hungary, during the interwar years, many thought, quite similarly, that the sudden collapse of the Dual Monarchy may have been avoided had the last emperor (and, more importantly, those in power after the collapse and dissolution) shown more composure. The strange “political metaphysics” related to all the eventful years before, during and after the Great War (with its numerous and far-reaching consequences) remained disquieting for the political and cultural elite of Hungary between 1920 and 1945. The idea of more composure in times of unprecedented turmoil also remained (and remains in our days) a key issue for both historical and retrospective political analysis. In Hungary, more often than not, current politico-historical debates are filled with commonplace remarks on personal responsibility, conspiracy and scapegoat theories.⁹

It is right to say perhaps, though with some exaggeration, that the cornerstones of historical thinking about WWI in Hungary were laid down in the interwar period. After the decades of Communism, our public debates on history seem to return to their basic ideological sources whose genesis is to be found in

⁷ *Heinrich von Srbik* (1878–1951), Austrian historian. From 1912 to 1922 a professor at the University of Graz, and from 1922 to 1945 at the University of Vienna.

⁸ Alexandre (Alexander) Spitzmüller, “L’automne 1918 en Autriche-Hongrie,” *Revue historique* 205 (1951): 81.

⁹ For scapegoat theories in Hungarian history see: György Gyarmati, István Lengvári, Attila Pók and József Vonyó (eds.): *Bűnbak minden időben: Bűnbakok a magyar és az egyetemes történelemben* (Budapest, Pécs: Kronosz Kiadó – Magyar Történelmi Társulat – Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történelmi Levéltára, 2013)

and after 1918, keeping in mind that the war of 1914 had a major catalytic effect. It is enough to throw a glance at Kossuth Square after its recent renewal, and compare the new look with the past appearance of the square to understand the importance of 1918 as a historic reference point of utmost significance for the whole political spectrum. Thus, after almost a century, a further understanding of the “political metaphysics” of the war and 1918 has not yet lost its importance.

Chaos was a characteristic of events both in Austria and Hungary. In the latter, the upheaval proved to be a more extended period, while earlier, in the days of armistice, Austria seemed to be in a lot more complicated situation, not even in a position to define itself as an independent national identity. Chaos management and adapting policies to a new situation were ultimately more successful in Vienna.¹⁰ Indeed, one aspect of the “politico-metaphysical” views still well-established in the Hungarian mind is what we could call a certain “chaos theory”; that is to say, the absence of a competent leader aggravated by the confused state of mind of the masses. It is an idea of bad leadership combined with the hazy perception of the people in the streets fully incapable of recognising their own interests. Strong emphasis is given to descriptions of inadequate governance, mostly with particular relevance to the days of November 1918. In this respect, the well-known writer and politician Count Miklós Bánffy gives a very vivid description of those days in his memoirs written in an entertaining belle-lettres style. Bánffy, with his witty remarks, gives a good example of the Hungarian mind-set or the “chaos theory”, and he provides an interesting analysis of the human and political character of Count Mihály Károlyi, his former childhood friend and relative. Looking for explanations concerning events and unsuccessful government policies between November 1918 and March 1919, Bánffy tried to provide an early, not scientific analysis of psycho-history. According to Bánffy, his relative was a gambler who had always been prone to seek challenge and

¹⁰ Rauchensteiner, Reichshaftung, 59-65.

extreme risk. All this, allegedly, resulted from his childhood illnesses and relative isolation. Károlyi, he argued, was eager to find both self-esteem and respect, and this explains why he had been ready to put his life at risk as a young man, and why he was equally ready to “stake his all upon a single cast” following his vague hopes for a world revolution in 1918.¹¹ Bánffy recalled two events concerning the youth of Károlyi: on one occasion, he tried his luck in a multi-purpose balloon and parachute gadget built by a suspicious inventor; and on a second occasion, he put his (and Bánffy’s) life at risk on the stormy Adriatic Sea just to get earlier to a ball in Fiume.¹²

Remarks on the dualist system, questions of responsibility and the role of Tisza

As for 1914, the idea of missing or inadequate leadership is rare to find in the memoirs of the pre-1918 ruling elite. It is interesting how the pressures and inadequacies of the dualist system appear in the book written by Count István Burián after the war. With allusions to political responsibility, Burián concludes in his flight of wit that the Austro-Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs was in an isolated position because he “was joint minister for the two countries, but did not form any cabinet with such colleagues as were also joint ministers”, only presided at a “conference” of joint ministers on a quasi *ad hoc* basis. He would indicate that any decision of serious kind had been the result of a compromise, while the Foreign Minister was acting at best as mediator, very much at the mercy of the two Prime Ministers East and West of the river Leitha.¹³ Count

¹¹ Miklós Bánffy, Gróf, *Egy erdélyi gróf emlékiratai: Emlékeimből – Huszonöt év* (Budapest: Helikon, 2013), 65-75., See also: *The Phoenix Land: The Memoirs of Count Miklós Bánffy*, trans. Patrick Thursfield and Katalin Bánffy-Jelen (London: Arcadia ; 2003)

¹² *Ibid.*, 67-68.

¹³ Stephan Burián. *Austria in Dissolution* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1925), 244.

Burián somewhat downplayed the significance of his own high office by neglecting the importance of informal powers rendered to it. Placing the role of the Common Minister of Foreign Affairs in a comparative line of thought, Burián emphasized the constitutional weaknesses of this otherwise important office. While he must have clearly felt the aforementioned weaknesses of his position in the historic end phase, before the final collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy, the informal power assets attached to it were still significant. Informal assets were derived from the unique and yet constitutionally hazy nature of the position, leaving a wide margin for successful manoeuvres and serious errors at the same time.¹⁴ The Foreign Minister could have an important role in setting the agenda for the Common Ministerial Council, or process selected information to influence decision-makers of the two imperial halves, receive confidential information through agents and contacts from different political circles in Hungary and Austria, and act accordingly (all this being more evident in times of debates and crisis). The door of Francis Joseph was open for the Foreign Minister without previous notice, while personal trust and close working relationship could be developed between the Emperor and the holder of this high office, which, (in the case of Alois Lexa Aehrenthal for example) meant an utterly profound attachment on the side of Francis Joseph. In Burián's book, the special significance of the office of Foreign Minister and his proximity to the imperial sovereign were largely left in the shadows. Meanwhile, it can be accepted that the ultimate responsibility for grave decisions rested with the Emperor who was nevertheless more exposed to the influence of strong political characters inside and outside the "*Ministerrat für Gemeinsame Angelegenheiten*" (the Common

¹⁴ For decision making and the impact of informal power assets attached to the Foreign Minister, the Emperor and other important public figures see: István Diószegi, "A külpolitikai ügyintézés struktúrája és a döntéshozatal mechanizmusa az Osztrák-Magyar Monarchiában," *Grotius*, April 25, 2016, http://www.grotius.hu/doc/pub/MHHLZG/dioszegi_omm_kulpol.pdf

Ministerial Council).¹⁵ Later, following the outbreak of the war, as the viability of the Monarchy was at stake and the military-operational interests had to be brought in harmony with political goals, the position of the Foreign Minister gained importance, particularly as a member of the Military Chancellery. Francis Joseph saw his own responsibility in the July Crisis in between the two Prime Ministers and the Foreign Ministry in a somewhat obscure light, viewing himself as a “constitutional monarch” who in the midst of pro-war attitudes and advisors “could not act otherwise” and was finally “forced to give in”.¹⁶

Count Burián was a long-standing political supporter and friend of István Tisza whose motives and intentions regarding foreign policy and war aims could hardly be interpreted better by anyone else.¹⁷ He remains mostly apologetic of Tisza in his book, although with a clear touch of criticism which, by any means, occasionally cannot be called even gentle or considerate. Burián argued that Tisza’s judgment “on certain points” affecting Hungary’s position in Europe and the position of the “Magyar race in Hungary itself” was “led astray by atavistic prejudice”, and arrived at a conclusion as follows here:

“...he sincerely believed that the welfare of his country would be assured by maintaining unchanged the relationship between the various peoples of Hungary, which he regarded as sanctified by law and tradition and unassailable as a dogma. (...) Tisza was a thoroughly representative man, and therefore his policy, which was always rather of a broad-minded order, was somewhat out of tune with the times. (...) Tisza overlooked one

¹⁵ Somogyi Éva, *Kormányzati rendszer a dualista Habsburg Monarchiában* (Budapest: História-MTA Történettudományi Intézete, 1996), 93-101, 178-182.

¹⁶ Manfred Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy, 1914 – 1918* (Wien, Köln, Weimar: Böhlau Verlag 2014), 621-622, 629. For the contacts of the Emperor and the Foreign Ministers see: 623.

¹⁷ Tamás Goreczky, „Stefan Burián, ein ungarischer gemeinsamer Minister der Habsburgermonarchie im Spiegel der österreichischen Memoirenliteratur.” In *Öt Kontinens – Az Új- és Jelenkori Egyetemes Történeti Tanszék tudományos közleményei 2009*, ed. István Majoros, 187-202.(Budapest: ELTE, 2009), 196., Burián, *Austria in Dissolution*, 251.

thing, that his policy, whether sound or not, had become impracticable during the period of his political activity. The disposition of forces in the country had gradually shifted, especially under the influence of neighbouring national states, who followed the general trend of the time and were obviously influenced by catch-words invented abroad.”¹⁸

Indeed, Tisza had a primarily Magyar perspective and in following the national objectives, he kept opposing all ambitious plans before and during the war which intended to revitalise the Dual Monarchy on the level of European great power politics. He did not find it difficult to adapt his policies to the Hungarian mainstream predominantly occupied with internal policy, the nationality issue and constitutional problems. He strongly opposed not only the integration of “Congress Poland” into the Habsburg Monarchy which Burián had proposed in August 1915 and which had been advocated by Count Gyula Andrásy the Younger, but was less than enthusiastic about German and Austrian *Mitteleuropa* Plans.¹⁹

Many years after the world crisis, Tisza, long deceased, was unable to defend his standpoint and, similarly, many of the key players were dead before the late twenties or proved to be meticulous and slow due to the awareness of their personal role as the example of Count Leopold Berchtold shows us.²⁰ Berchtold had never been in doubt that neither himself nor Germany carried any particular responsibility or war guilt (*Kriegsschuld*) for bringing about the catastrophe of the century. Still, he wanted to show every aspect and motive with an interest in international relations.²¹

¹⁸ Burián, *op.cit.*, 252.

¹⁹ Alfred Francis Pribram, *Austrian Foreign Policy, 1908-18* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1923), 93-94., Burián, *op.cit.*, 263.

²⁰ Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., „Austria and the Origins of the Great War: A Selective Historiographical Survey,” In *1914: Austria-Hungary, the Origins, and the First Year of World War I*, eds. Günter Bischof, Ferdinand Karlsrufer, Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., 21-33. (Innsbruck, New Orleans: University of New Orleans Press–Innsbruck University Press, 2014), 23.

²¹ Günther Kronenbitter, „Amnesia and Remembrance – Count Berchtold on 1914,” In *1914: Austria-Hungary, the Origins, and the First Year of World War*

Personal impressions, the international horizon and memories

While the scope of the memoirs written by Austrians can be characterized by a wider international horizon, on the Hungarian side, most remarkably, few were interested in the tangled web of diplomatic relations and international events beyond the borders of Hungary. The majority of narratives remained “domestic”. The missing or limited international horizon of Hungarian memoirs is without exaggeration a fairly general characteristic mostly determined by political myth-making. The work of Gyula Andrassy Jr.²² is an exception (representing a certain segment of the post-war conservative elite in Hungary). Apart from him, only those heavily opposed to Horthy and his system would discuss the question of nationalities and social problems, and they would be the ones to show serious criticism concerning foreign policy decisions.²³ According to Andrassy, the “system” maintained peace longer than a “concert” of fully independent states with a “free hand” would have done – yet “a shorter peace would not have ended with a world disaster”. He pointed out that the mutual relations of the two groups of states only “assumed a dangerous aspect” when the “Anglo-German opposition was added to the controversy”. He described the Anglo-German antagonism as the second most important cause of the Great War.²⁴ He devoted quite a few lines to the Anglo-Saxon ways of policy-making and the role of King Edward VII. Looking for explanations for the success of British diplomacy,

I, eds. Günter Bischof, Ferdinand Karlhofer, Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., 77-90. (Innsbruck, New Orleans: University of New Orleans Press–Innsbruck University Press, 2014), 78.

²² Andrassy Gyula (Julius) (1860–1929) on October 24, 1918, in the closing days of the Great War, he succeeded Count Stephen Burián as Foreign Minister with the purpose of terminating the alliance with Germany concluded by his father in 1879.

²³ Gergely Romsics, *Mitosz és emlékezet: A Habsburg Birodalom felbomlása az osztrák és a magyar politikai elit emlékirat-irodalmában* (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2004), 66.

²⁴ Count Julius Andrassy, *Diplomacy and the War* (London: John Bale Sons and Danielsson, 1921), 2., 82.

he approached the problem from a peculiar angle of a sort of “mentality study”. His illustrative thoughts are here:

“Anglomania and snobbery are diseases that have spread far and wide, but they are also powerful weapons of English diplomacy. Many people are glad to be mistaken for Englishmen. A large proportion of our diplomats are very much impressed by the English gentleman. Most of our diplomats are proud, if they meet an English lord, and they believe blindly whatever a Salisbury or a Grey says to them. The natural, easy and simple appearance of Englishmen gives the impression of honesty. However, in the blood of every Englishman there is so much political experience and such a tradition of self-government as has never been inherited by the sons of another nation. Every Englishman has been brought up in the school of international politics and self-government in a measure in which no son of the same social strata of another nation, either in the past or in the present, has ever done.”²⁵

The words quoted above reflected widespread views which became deeply rooted and recalled several times after the First World War. Andrassy formulated his opinion cautiously with some gentle irony in his words. This shows, however, the negative attitudes towards “perfidious Albion” without whose clever machinations, as we find similar implications in various texts and allusions, peace could have been preserved easier.²⁶ After the war, Count Alexander Hoyos, who had a key role during the July Crisis with his mission to Berlin to assure German backing for Austria-Hungary against Serbia, devoted a whole book to the study of the Anglo-German Antagonism, though he added little to the general controversy.²⁷ The central role and

²⁵ *ibid.*, 101.

²⁶ András Joó, „Perfidious Albion” vs „Austria-Germany”: Aehrenthal, Cartwright and the Dual Monarchy: Great Power Policy through the Eyes of Diplomats,” *Studia Finno-Ugrici* (1999-2001): 158-160.

²⁷ Alexander Hoyos, *Der deutsch-englische Gegensatz und sein Einfluß auf die Balkanpolitik Österreich-Ungarns* (Berlin: Verlag de Gruyter, 1922)

responsibility of England is an ever-returning topos. Even the relatively Entente-friendly diplomat Baron Gyula Szilassy who had good ties to Mihály Károlyi, and a former student at the reputable public school of Harrow, argued that Englishmen carry matters to extremes following the principle of “right or wrong my country”.²⁸

Andrássy, when looking back at events, did not forget to view those, as it was the case during the time of the war already, with a strong, critical judgement. In his analytic memoir, though, he felt necessary to identify himself frequently with the official position of Austro-Hungarian diplomacy. As Gergely Romsics pointed out in his book, he expressed even linguistically (with the use of the present tense) the drama and agony of the Habsburg Monarchy. As most Hungarian writings, even Andrásy's can be characterised as a chain of episodes and also more in the style of pamphleteers than that of a devoted historian. Austrians generally wanted to show a more distancing view relying on documents and research. Berchtold was working painstakingly on his memoirs through extensive correspondence with his former *Ballhausplatz* colleagues, while rejecting pressing requests to publish his own version of events.²⁹ A British writer expressed to him that the “world” was “looking forward to hearing” what he had to say. This directs the attention to a major dilemma of writing history, and more exactly writing about one's own past. Should one share subjective reminiscences without the support of proper evidence, thereby risking inexactness, or do meticulous archival research? Some – like Berchtold – were too worried that their memory would fail them. Mostly, it was clear that before all the archival papers were combed through and every detail of the chain of events was elaborated, witnesses of history were likely to descend into their graves.³⁰

²⁸ Baron Julius (Gyula) Szilassy, *Der Untergang der Donau-Monarchie* (Berlin: Verlag Neues Vaterland, 1921) 26.

²⁹ Romsics, *Mítosz és emlékezet*, 142., Kronenbitter, „Amnesia and Remembrance”, 84-85.

³⁰ Kronenbitter, *op. cit.*, 85.

The problems discussed here could be called the “paradox” of contemporary history writing. While important witnesses were still around, worries of possible public reactions and haunting thoughts of their shattered world would not help them to discuss recent history in an objective manner. Clearly, there might have been numerous reasons to keep silent; as József Sztérényi, Minister of Commerce in Sándor Wekerle’s third government, emphasised in the foreword of his memoirs (having the somewhat romanticising title “Recollections of Times Long Past – Political Notes”), he published “only a part of the rich material” of “eventful political times”. Only the part, he indicated with special stress, which was “ripe for publication”.³¹ Sztérényi, like Wekerle, rose to the highest political leadership due to his talent, hard work and some good luck. His remembrance reflects a particular viewpoint of those assimilated Jews (both his parents came from rabbinical families) who experienced an unprecedentedly quick career.³² He remained attached to the Dual Monarchy and most particularly to its exiled Emperor. He condemned the October Revolution and Károlyi’s policies, but could not really identify himself with the public spirit of the Horthy era. Sztérényi’s description of the efforts of Emperor Karl to consolidate his empire in the last moments before the final collapse is very vivid and informative, and a touch of irony is not missing from it, either. In fact, the account of his talks with Karl and the background information he provides show clearly why the endeavour of the Emperor to give a new federal structure to the Danubian Monarchy was hopeless. He also indicated his confidential relationship to the last King of Hungary, while almost sarcastic irony is reflected in his words when describing an episode en route to Reichenau where he was, among others, ordered by Emperor Karl for important talks. On the train, General Adolf von Rhemen’s (then the

³¹ József Sztérényi, *Régmúlt idők emlékei: Politikai feljegyzések* (Budapest: Pesti Könyvnyomda Rt., 1925), 5.

³² György Kövér, “Bekeresztelkedők: Társadalomtörténeti adalékok arról, hányféle asszimiláció lehetséges egy családban”, *Kommentár*, no. 6., 2012, April 19, 2015 http://kommentar.info.hu/iras/2012_6/bekeresztelkedok#foot50

Military Governor of Serbia) attention was fully captured by his fellow-general's efficient boot polish in spite of his interlocutor's repeated efforts to change the subject; he was simply "most interested in this", Szterényi observed, and he closed abruptly the relevant paragraph.³³

On the historian's side, a fair judgement concerning causal connections is hardly possible without a picture of political relations reflecting life's reality and the knowledge of how much those involved were indeed well-informed. A useful memoir provides information that goes beyond what is called "common knowledge". A remark uttered accidentally by a key decision-maker and cited later may encourage us to re-evaluate a situation. In the July Crisis and before the 1918 armistice, there were several moments in which the personal exchange of information seemed decisive. Szterényi also indicated the importance of personal relations and the flow of information influencing the effectiveness of political endeavours.

Interpretation of domestic and structural problems, the "war guilt" question and the history of the defeated

It depends largely on the approach of the historian to what extent he sees explanations in the overall rivalry of great powers. In this context, war seemed to be nearly unavoidable and any peaceful settlement impossible. Other historians may be more inclined to focus on the phases of the July Crisis, personal intrigue, intelligence failure or the breakdown of diplomatic communication. One of Hungary's most respected historians Henrik Marczali (the son of Rabbi Morgenstern of the provincial town of Marcali, exposed to disguised anti-Semitic witch hunts before and after World War I) in his pamphlet "How the Great War was made?" (dedicated to the memory of István Tisza), draws the attention to the significance of private information gaps and distortions. Thus, he thought, all the fervent endeavours

³³ Szterényi, *Régmúlt idők*, 219-224., for the ironic paragraph see: 219.

of the crowned heads of Europe were to no avail. He presented the decision of Tsar Nicholas to enter the war as the result of misunderstandings, distorted information and lies, although the Russian emperor feared the catastrophic consequences. So did German Chief of the General Staff Helmuth von Moltke who indeed said that the upcoming war would “annihilate the civilisation of almost the whole of Europe for decades to come”.³⁴ Still, Moltke did not hesitate to issue orders, and ultimately nor did the Tsar.

In Marczali's interpretation, as a result of great power rivalry, particularly the German challenge to the 19th century balance of power, the decisive moment had come in July 1914. With reference to his articles before the First World War, quoting his own words, the historian shows himself prophetic in his introductory passage. He mentions that due to Tisza's confidence, he was allowed to get access to “unpublished material”. He argues that in October 1918, Tisza's son was lamenting over his “poor father” who was then about to “perish miserably” because he “did not listen to Marczali”.³⁵

Regarding domestic politics, Gyula Andrásy Jr. was a severe opponent and ardent critic of Tisza, not even on speaking terms with him following the days of July 1918. Nevertheless, after a lengthy analysis of pre-war international relations, he still pays tribute with the following words to Tisza, whose attitude was “most peaceful”. He argued like this:

“During the first Cabinet meeting which considered the consequences of the murder, all the Hungarian and Austrian Ministers, with the exception of Tisza, demanded the war and considered that immediate action which would surprise Serbia was the only means to the desired end. It was only Tisza who prevented

³⁴ Henrik Marczali, *Hogyan készült a nagy háború?* (Budapest: Athenaeum Irodalmi és Nyomdai Rt., 1923), 55-57., for the role of private information and common knowledge, as well as the words of Moltke see: Jack Snyder, “Better Now Than Later: The Paradox of 1914 as Everyone's Favored Year for War,” *International Security* 39, no. 1 (Summer 2014): 71., 77-78.

³⁵ Marczali, *op.cit.*, 6.

the realization of this conviction. He was ready to be content with a diplomatic victory which should be the starting point for a more active policy that was to improve our position. However, this attitude did not finally dictate the policy of the Monarchy. When the ultimatum was drafted, and during subsequent events, the intention of forcing Serbia to war became paramount.”³⁶

It should be added that Tisza at a certain point of the Balkan wars, for example, was more in favour of a military strike than the Foreign Minister, Count Berchtold.³⁷ The endless debates on personal responsibility for Armageddon in the 1920s and 1930s diverted the attention from the structural problems of competence and authority within the dualist system. Notably, the final decision concerning war and peace lay with the Monarch, and this – politically speaking – left limited freedom of manoeuvre for Tisza, or else Hungarian loyalty could have been questioned seriously. With a bit of sense for psycho-history as well, Tisza’s wavering is more understandable. After long decades of prosperity and stability which bore high respect for Francis Joseph, Tisza’s representing minority opinion probably proved to be too heavy a burden. During the crisis, the importance of the Imperial House was strengthened and following the declaration of war on Serbia, pro-war sentiment was further reinforced. In Budapest, mass demonstrations of loyalty towards the new heir apparent and his wife Zita strengthened the will to bring sacrifice for the Monarchy. During the July Crisis, it seemed that dualism “withstood its test of fire” as it was put into words by the author of a comprehensive monograph on the role of nationalism and the crowd in Hungary.³⁸ The real test of fire, however, was still to come.

³⁶ Andrásy, *Diplomacy and the War*, 59-60., see also Andrásy Gyula gróf, *Diplomácia és világháború* (Budapest: Göncöl-Primusz, 1990), 42.

³⁷ Eric A. Leuer, “Die Mission Hoyos – Zur Rolle österreichisch-ungarischer Diplomaten während der Juli-Krise 1914” (M. Phil. diss., University of Vienna, 2010), 71.

³⁸ Alice Freifield, *Nationalism and the Crowd in Liberal Hungary, 1848-1914* (Baltimore, London, Washington: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press-The Johns Hopkins University Press), 305.

In Hungary, after the First World War, the highest authority on diplomatic history was Jenő Horváth³⁹ who wrote a comprehensive essay on post-war school books at the request of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in 1926. His observations on the origins of the war were summarized in an impressive illustrated volume on the Great War with a foreword by Archduke Joseph Habsburg. Most interesting is his argumentation related to the end phase of the war and the impact of President Woodrow Wilson's famous Fourteen Points. Horváth found American entry into the war very decisive. The Fourteen Points in his interpretation were only part of a tactical game on the side of the USA. Thus, Wilson continued to negotiate and maintained secret channels to Austria-Hungary first with the intention to influence the outcome by the promise of a just peace, with even a separate peace for the Monarchy on the horizon. Still, Wilson proved to be too weak and his policy served only the interests of the French and the annexationist peace for the benefit of the successor states.⁴⁰ This reflects one of the mythical topoi of inter-war Hungary which could be called Wilsonian "treachery". As historian Tibor Glant pointed out on Hungarian myth-making concerning Wilson a couple of years ago, any illusions of American support for the preservation of historical borders were utterly false by October 1918. False impressions were largely generated by whirling events followed by a period of illusory expectations and painful awakening. The "great failure" of the USA, ultimately not a signatory power of the Trianon Treaty, was hoped to be corrected according to the general view in Hungary. Treacherous Wilsonism became a topos, though supported only by little evidence in the documentation already known in Hungary between the two world wars. It was more or less part of the process of digesting the nation's recent past.⁴¹

³⁹ Jenő Horváth (1881-1950), diplomatic historian.

⁴⁰ Jenő Horváth, "I. rész: A háború politikája," in *A világháború története*, ed. Jenő Pilch, 9-64. (Budapest: Franklin-Társulat, 1927), 45.

⁴¹ Tibor Glant, "A 14 pont története és mítosza," *Külgügyi Szemle* vol. 8., no. 4 (October 2009): 91-96.

Besides myth-making and “home” historiography, Hungary was an active participant of the efforts made on the international level to explore the history of the Great War as it was shown by volumes which were the result of research work supported by the Carnegie Endowment. Hungarians including Szterényi, Count Albert Apponyi, Gusztáv Gratz (former Director of the Politico-Commercial Department of Austro-Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, appointed by Count Ottokar Czernin) and a few others, all experts in their respective fields, took part in the cooperation to publish a series of studies and monographs.⁴² While Hungary and Germany found it important to make their contributions to a joint international effort initiated from the other side of the Atlantic, there were organised initiatives to work together to build up a scientifically well-founded refutation of the War Guilt Clause in Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles which forced to accept the responsibility of Germany and her allies for imposing the war on the Entente by their aggression. The German Foreign Office supported research and publications on the *Kriegsschuldfrage* (war guilt question). A conference of Austrian, Bulgarian, German and Hungarian “*Kriegsschulforscher*” was organised behind closed doors in Berlin from 15th to 19th April, 1926. The conference was presided by the famous Otto Hintze, historian and former government official. A network of institutes was envisaged and coordinated propaganda efforts were suggested in an effort to question the war guilt defined in the peace treaties and to avoid blaming former allies. In the second half of the year 1926, further talks followed, including one in Budapest. A kind of common strategy that preparations should be made to come up with a research project in order to win the support of the Carnegie Endowment became crystallized. This would have resulted in extensive research done mostly for the exploration of the war guilt problem, but the Carnegie Endowment was not

⁴² James T. Shotwell, ed., *Economic and Social History of The World War: Outline Of Plan – European Series* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1924), 15-16.

“inclined to spend any more of its limited budget” on the project in which Jenő Horváth was also planned to be involved.⁴³

Two somewhat unique observations outside the main line of discourse

Criticism, although not entirely missing, was not at all characteristic of Hungarian reminiscences. The origins and structural causes of the war were mostly analysed by opponents of dualism, mainly the Hungarian liberals and social democrats, many of whom were forced into exile after the failed revolutions. They emphasise almost unanimously that reform was coming too late and hesitant reforms from above were far from being sufficient. The so-called “Octobrists” (*oktobristák*) and social democrats involved in Béla Kun’s Soviet Republic felt it more than necessary to enter polemics with the Hungarian variant of the German *Dolchstoß* Legend (Stab-in-the-back myth) which was putting all the blame for an unacceptable peace treaty solely on their shoulders.⁴⁴

Péter Ágoston⁴⁵, political scientist and one of the interesting yet somewhat forgotten protagonists of 1918 and 1919, wrote a long essay (“The War’s Originators”) to analyse the long-term origins and immediate causes of the war which appeared only four days before the declaration of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. In the foreword, he made it clear that the Central Powers were more responsible for the war than the Entente (this remark, however, may have easily been a result of the

⁴³ Ulrich Heinemann, *Die verdrängte Niederlage: Politische Öffentlichkeit und Kriegsschuldfrage in der Weimarer Republik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck u. Ruprecht, 1983), 116-118., 300.

⁴⁴ Romsics, *Mitosz és emlékezet*, 67-68.

⁴⁵ Ágoston Péter (1874-1925) Socialist publicist, State Secretary for Internal Affairs under Károlyi. Assistant Commissar of Foreign Affairs of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, finally Foreign Minister in Gyula Peidl’s six-day trade union cabinet (August 1919). Later arrested and sentenced to death, he was saved by the Soviet Union through the occasion of a prisoner exchange. In the 1920s he lived in Moscow, London, and finally in Paris.

situation, and it should be noted here that Ágoston was a person relatively acceptable for the Entente even in Kun's government). The central idea of Ágoston's essay is the problem of responsibility in all its forms. Towards the end of his lengthy argumentations, he arrives at the conclusion that those on the top of the governmental hierarchy carry the lion's share of the responsibility and ruling parties are to be called to account as well. Nevertheless, the people who are governed, he continued, were not a simple flock of "sheep"; thereby, the question of the responsibility of the masses cannot be evaded as they remained passive and cooperating. Finally, somewhat becoming obsessed with the war guilt issue, he pointed out that he could write a separate book to identify the partial responsibility of the individual layers of society. Notwithstanding, he concluded that there is no need for such a book as the population felt the consequences of bad government which they had tolerated too long anyway.⁴⁶ As for great power policy, Ágoston argued that Austria-Hungary's subordination to the German Reich and the continuous adjustment of the course of foreign policy to Germany's line in Vienna were in vain as the Germans were actually more than hesitant to provide any long-term guarantee to maintain the status quo and protect their ally's territorial integrity.⁴⁷ In fact, the idea of the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy was not entirely unwelcome in Germany.

On the traditional conservative side of the Dualist Monarchy's political elite, there is hardly anyone who would accept the extensive responsibility of Austria-Hungary for the war. József Kristóffy⁴⁸, a former Hungarian Minister of the Interior, was

⁴⁶ Péter Ágoston, *A háború okozói* (Budapest: Népszava Könyvkereskedés, 1919), 232-233.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 190.

⁴⁸ József Kristóffy (1857-1928) Hungarian politician who served as Minister of the Interior (1905-1906) in Géza Fejérváry's cabinet. He was a supporter of universal suffrage, and open towards the idea of a future coalition with the Social-Democratic Party. He was in contact with Franz Ferdinand's political "Workshop" for the objective of the structural reorganisation of the Monarchy. See about him: Győző Bruckner, *Ferenc Ferdinánd trónörökös magyarországi politikai tervei* (Miskolc: Magyar Jövő Nyomdaüzem és Lapkiadó Rt., 1929) 39.

of such kind. He was also one of the rare friends of Franz Ferdinand in Hungary. He labelled the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum to Serbia as the “greatest political mistake” during the “four hundred years of the reign of the House of Habsburg”. The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in his view did not take into consideration how much the international situation was fraught with danger, and went far beyond what seemed to be wise, so the “false step” resulted in “the earth swallowing us” as he expressed very dramatically. The Dual Monarchy was thus unwisely put to the test because the leaders did not realize that it was not one of the Great Powers any longer.⁴⁹ Kristóffy found that Vienna was playing *va banque* at the expense of others, including the masses living in an empire without political emancipation.

Kristóffy did create a detailed and documented survey of all the explanations for the decline, the thoughtless entry into the war and the final collapse from the point of view of Franz Ferdinand’s former adherents. According to his argumentation, the two “most burning” questions of the Monarchy, namely the nationality problem and the electoral reform, were left unsolved which made a war simply too hazardous. Interestingly, Jenő Horváth in his study presented above also found that “the tragedy of the Central Powers” ensued because their societal and constitutional Hinterland was not at all firm, and their respective political and social foundations were further impaired by the war. Meanwhile, leaders of Austria-Hungary were more preoccupied with their own ambitious plans. He emphasised that they failed to listen to public opinion because they governed “for their own sake” and never applied to the masses, nor did they seek communication with them in their mentality. This was a major cause of the defeat in Horváth’s opinion, while he admitted that at the beginning of the war, a

⁴⁹ József Kristóffy, *Magyarország kálváriája: Az összeomlás útja – Politikai emlékek 1890–1926* (Budapest: Wodianer, 1927) 725.

certain common denominator for the peoples of the Habsburg Monarchy was still present.⁵⁰

Summary and conclusions

It is widely agreed that the Monarchy's entry into the war came largely because of its need to preserve its Great Power status and to counter the challenges of its own nationalist political movements. For historians as well as many contemporary observers, Austria-Hungary after 1900 seemed to be a "failed state" even before World War I due to its frequent and sometimes paralysing internal crises. In an interesting study published in 2007, it was pointed out that in this perspective, the Monarchy's participation in the war was not a "purely exogenous factor" that led to its final demise. All this was combined, as contemporaries clearly observed, with the intransigent attitude of the Hungarian political elite and especially Tisza who hoped to strengthen central government authority in the face of challenges rather than to open ways towards a more democratic system of government.⁵¹ All this is often touched upon in post-war memoirs and analyses in addition to the problem of responsibility, war guilt, bad leadership and the traumatic changes after the war. Even if the various authors accepted some of the lessons of history, the trauma seemed to be very serious. In this context, illusions and myths were easily revived.⁵² New information or the discovery of documents still fostered ideas that the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy and the end of pre-Trianon Hungary with its thousand-year-old

⁵⁰ Kristóffy, *Magyarország kálváriája*, 799., Horváth, A háború politikája, 44-45. and 47-48.

⁵¹ Gary B. Cohen, "Nationalist Politics and the Dynamics of State and Civil Society in the Habsburg Monarchy, 1867-1914," *Central European History* 40 (2007): 241., 275.

⁵² Peter Hanák, "Ungarn im Auflösungsprozeß der Österreichisch-Ungarischen Monarchie: Grundlagen und Folgen," in *Versailles - St. Germain - Trianon Umbruch in Europa vor fünfzig Jahren*, ed. Karl Bosl, 37-48. (München U. Wien: R. Oldenbourg, 1971), 46-47.

borders could have been avoided by more composure or a strong leader's well-timed actions.

This paper intended to provide an overview of the central questions concerning the origins, the outbreak and the end of the First World War as it was discussed by Hungarian authors who were mainly active political participants of this great historical transition and by their approach were more or less unique as well. The character of Tisza, his role in the July Crisis, his attitude towards reform, his personal charisma and responsibility seem to put him into the centre of discussion. In general, personal failures of politicians and the description of the internal problems dominated the Hungarian historical discussions.

As part of the digestion of an eventful and undoubtedly tragic past, writing memoirs and interpreting recent history in Hungary, although very much influenced by European currents, had unique characteristics. Interwar memorialisation was to a large extent influenced by the unprecedentedly severe consequences and thusly the notion of war guilt. As it is pointed out in Jay Winter and Antoine Prost's survey on World War One historiography, quoted earlier at the beginning of this paper, "over time" the notion of war guilt "became less acute", and it became more obvious that states, governments as well as all peoples shared some responsibility for the catastrophe which they had been unable to prevent; "even worse", the argument continues, "the Treaty of Versailles was unable to prevent its recurrence", and what "had been deemed a crime had become a collective error, the elements of which had to be disentangled in order to comprehend how it had come about".⁵³ This collective error, however, as it was (and still is) widely felt in Hungary, had disproportionately grave consequences for Hungarians. The breakup of the Hungarian state of St. Stephen remained unacceptable for most. 1918 with its upheaval kept haunting Hungarian decision-makers during the Second World War which ironically reinforced their wait-and-see policy considerably. As

⁵³ Winter-Prost, *The Great War in History*, 56.

an important official of the Foreign Ministry emphasised, and let us read his words here instead of a closing remark, in an article written under a pseudonym in 1942: "...it is dangerous if the maximal effort is about to be made when the necessity of changes appears with the greatest emphasis. If at this moment the claim for change gets the upper hand, the opportunity for self-defence gets overwhelmed by catastrophe. As Gyula Illyés defined, in 1918, the freedom of the people did not mean the freedom of the nation."⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Pál Szegedi (Aladár Szegedy-Maszák), "A magyar politika néhány eleme," *Magyarságtudomány*, no. 4. (1942), 469., see also: Gyula Juhász, *Magyarország nemzetközi helyzete és a magyar szellemi élet 1938–1944* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1987), 56–57. Szegedy-Maszák became Head of the Political department of the Foreign Ministry, had a key role in Hungarian peace-feelers. He was sent to the Dachau concentration camp in 1944.