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## Pieces from the puzzle of the memory of WWI in Central and Eastern Europe\*

Centenaries of significant events in world history usually generate interest among professionals and the broader public alike. WWI was certainly a defining moment in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the starting point of the short 20<sup>th</sup> century, “Urkatastrophe”,<sup>1</sup> the first manifestation of the totality of modernity,<sup>2</sup> introduction to the “Age of Extremes”<sup>3</sup>, just to name a few of the popular designations of the war that surely has changed the course of history – and as such, it could not evade its fate, either. Since the approach of the anniversary of the attempt in Sarajevo, the war has become the subject of professional and popularizing publications, academic and sensationalist research projects and – not without political connotations – historical debates. Anniversaries are, however, social constructs and conventions, their meaning and significance never entirely detached from a given situation and social context, thus opening the gates for active politics of memory. Furthermore, within the European Union, the number of actors is even larger. Alongside national and/or state-sponsored politics of memory, the goal of the

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<sup>1</sup> Stephan Burgdorf and Klaus Wiegrefe, *Az első világháború. A XX. század őskatasztrófája*, Budapest: Napvilág, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Modris Ecksteins, *Rites of Spring. The Great War and The Birth of the Modern Age*, New York: 1986

<sup>3</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century*, London, Abacus, 1995.

EU is to actively foster a European memory, too. It is hard to satisfy the demand for a unified memory concerning an event that divides the continent not only into winners and losers, but also into different categories according to the consequences of the war and its intensity, too. Would it really be possible to bundle together the separate social memories of the collapsed Russian Empire resurrected in the form of the Soviet Union, the secularized and modernized Turkey that replaced the Ottoman Empire, the small and often quarrelling nation-state successors of the disappeared Austria-Hungary, the re-emerged Poland with the ambitions of a Great Power,<sup>4</sup> the revolutionized Germany that nevertheless could have preserved its semi-hegemonic position in Europe,<sup>5</sup> Italy that has barely escaped military collapse in 1917 but still could pretend to be a winner, or the triumphant France and Great Britain?

But if we turn our attention to Central and Eastern Europe, we must face further questions. How do politics of memory or similar activities aimed at fostering social memory work, and what are their impacts on the societies of the region? Are there any common Central and Eastern European characteristics, or at least points of entanglement, between various national politics of memory in the region? How are these affected by earlier varieties of the memory of WWI? Although the eleven papers presented at the conference 'Memory and Memorialisation of WWI in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe: Past and Present' could not offer an overarching evaluation the phenomenon, they gave a series of starting points for further discussion on these issues, too. The talks tackled the political background of anniversaries, peculiarities of the national historiographies, monuments and their contexts, the most common discussions like the responsibility for the outbreak of the war, interwar practices of memory or the content of school textbooks. Without

<sup>4</sup> Baár, Mónika 'Kis népek a nagyhatalmak árnyékában', 2000, 25 (2014) 6., 55-60.

<sup>5</sup> István Diószegi, *Bismarck und Andrassy. Ungarn in der deutschen Machtpolitik in der 2. Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Budapest, München, Wien: Teleki Laszlo Stiftung, 1999.

being exhaustive, the presentations highlighted a series of regional commonalities and differences that are worth exploring beyond merely summarizing the texts.

The most important among them is how the memory of the end of the war and its outcome dominated and still dominates its memory in the region. It does not simply focus on the status of winner and loser states and the memory of this fact. Instead, irrespective of victory or defeat, being born out of the collapse of the empires or just profiting from it, state formation and its territorial aspects form the focus of politics of memory. In most cases, it was also bound together with the legitimation of the state either through the peace settlement or through national revolution at the end of WWI. Even if the content of this memory is highly different in victorious and defeated countries, its focus, and thus its structure, are surprisingly similar. Importance is attributed neither to the events of the four war years, nor the social changes, nor their imprint on the memory of diverse social groups that spent these years in the frontlines or in the hinterland, but to the momentary events of collapse, revolution and state-foundation. The issue of continuity and rupture as well as the relationship with the world before 1914 certainly separate Austria and Hungary on the one hand, and the other successor states on the other. The latter group legitimized their existence in opposition to the monarchy (“the prison of nations”) and instrumentalized the war for this aim, too. However, considering the historiographic attempts to draw a line between interwar and dualist Hungary,<sup>6</sup> or the uncertainties surrounding the memory of the Monarchy in interwar Austria,<sup>7</sup> the difference does not seem so significant.

The past hundred years have not left this basic structure entirely unaltered. One of the common points of the presentations (Petra Svoljšak, Barnabás Vajda, Ivan Hrstić) was how the

<sup>6</sup> Szekfű Gyula, *Három nemzedék. Egy hanyatló kor története*, Budapest: Élet Irodalmi Nyomda, 1920

<sup>7</sup> Romsics Gergely, *Nép, nemzet. Birodalom. A Habsburg Birodalom emlékezete a német, osztrák és magyar történetpolitikai gondolkodásban*, Budapest: Új Mandátum, 2010

official memory and official memorialisation have changed after WWII. However, it did not mean a turn towards the war years instead of the outcome, but rather a decline in the significance of WWI and the original founding myth for the legitimisation of the respective states in the new era. It was especially marked in the case of the second Yugoslavia which henceforward drew its legitimacy from the war of liberation against Nazi and Fascist occupation after 1941, and not from Serbian victory in 1918. To a lesser extent, WWI was devalued as a founding myth in other countries like Czechoslovakia or Poland, too.

The change of regime brought new challenges. This time, it was not the role of the two world wars in the history of the nation that needed to be addressed, but the expectations deriving from the attempt to foster a common European memory.<sup>8</sup> The Great War was surpassed in importance by the memory of the Holocaust and, in terms of politics of memory, that of the Communist period. As European memory is driven by the European Union, the issue was felt more strongly in countries whose accession prospects were better. However, with the debate of “Western” and “Eastern” memory – the evaluation of the Communist period as a suffering and trauma equal to the Holocaust being at stake – the memory of WWI remained a secondary issue until the anniversary. The question of its relation to these seminal traumatic experiences was rarely tackled. The sole exception was Hungary where the rival politics of memories of right and left integrated the traditional memory of WWI, the one focusing on its outcome, into their overarching constructs. “Trianon”, as it is usually referred to, was connected to the memory of the Holocaust and Communism, although in a mutually exclusive way.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> James Mark, *The Unfinished Revolution. Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central-Eastern Europe*, London, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010, Małgorzata Pakier and Bo Stråth (eds), *European Memory?* Oxford, New York: Berghahn, 2009

<sup>9</sup> Márton Dornbach, Remains of a Picnic. Post-Transition Hungary and its Austro-Hungarian Past, *Austrian History Yearbook* 44 (2014) 255–291., Feischmidt Margit, ‘Populáris emlékezetpolitikák és az újnacionalizmus. A Trianon-kultusz társadalmi alapjai’, in Feischmidt Margit (ed.), *Nemzet*

It is often simply a recycling of traditional discourses already popular during the interwar period, a focus on the causes of the collapse, or the denial of any Hungarian responsibility for the war. In other cases, like the recent wave of research (and sometimes cult-building) dedicated to the figure of István Tisza, it is a reconceptualisation of these earlier tropes.<sup>10</sup> It is hardly unique, as Erwin Schmidl demonstrated in his presentation, that the first edition of Manfred Rauchensteiner's seminal work on Austria-Hungary's last war criticized Minister of Foreign Affairs Count Berchtold and Chief of the General Staff General Conrad von Hötzendorf for bearing a significant share of the responsibility for the war, while the recent second edition points to Francis Joseph in this regard and shows more empathy for the minister and the general.<sup>11</sup> Aleksandar Miletić also pointed out how historical debates concerning responsibility – not least because of the success of Christopher Clark's *Sleepwalkers*, a book that is seen as irreparably revisionist concerning the issue of responsibility for the war – flared up in Serbia (the dominant opinion exonerates Serbia from any share in it), and how it also helped to revive the cult of Gavrilo Princip and the Russian alliance. Taken together with the Czech Republic where the cult of founding fathers Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and Edvard Beneš, whose figures were already central to the interwar founding myth of the republic, still dominates social memory, one could conclude that the revival of interwar models of memory is rather the rule and not the exception in Central and Eastern Europe.

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*a mindennapokban. Az újnacionalizmus populáris kultúrája*, Budapest: L'Harmattan–MTA Társadalomkutató Központ, 2014, 51–81., Trianon, avagy „traumatikus fordulat” a magyar történetírásban, *Korall*, 59 (2015) 1. 82–107.

<sup>10</sup> Maruzsa Zoltán and Pallai László (eds.), *Tisza István emlékezete. Tanulmányok Tisza István születésének 150. évfordulójára*. Debrecen: Debreceni Egyetem Történeti Intézete, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Manfred Rauchensteiner, *Der Tod es Doppeladlers. Österreich-Ungarn und der Erste Weltkrieg 1914-1918*, Graz: Styria Verlag, 1994 and Idem. *Der Erste Weltkrieg und das Ende der Habsburgermonarchie*, Köln, Wien, Weimar: Böhlau, 2013.

It does not mean, however, that different patterns could not be discerned in memory. It is probably safe to conclude that the lack of serious research on the war in the last decades is one of the reasons behind the persistence of the traditional models of remembering. Not that there would have been much serious research done and made accessible when these models were established immediately after WWI, while the strength and success of the myths themselves, based on the insufficient knowledge of the facts, certainly contributed to the one-sided nature of the memory of WWI. The first years following the peace were obviously determined by the first generation of historiography<sup>12</sup> with its interest in military and diplomatic history and, at least in the case of the defeated nations, with its obsession with the responsibility issue accompanied by slightly counterfactual questions: “Would it have been possible for the Central Powers to win the war militarily?” or “Would it have been possible to avoid the war?”

It is important to see, however, that certain founding myths almost necessarily subdued one or other type of social memory. In the case of the defeated, like Hungary, the frequently used “*Dolchstosslegende*” (stab-in-the-back-myth) and the uniform condemnation of the revolutions at the end of the war, grown out of a multitude of deprivations during the war, left little room for depicting the social experience of the war apart from the stereotypical rehashing of the anti-Semitic picture of war profiteer Jews who had exempted themselves from front service.<sup>13</sup> After all, admitting that the war really had reconfigured society, exhausted the state and empowered new social groups could have led to the conclusion that the collapse had not simply been the result of accidental factors or conspiracy. But even

<sup>12</sup> Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History. Debates and Controversies from 1914 to the Present*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005

<sup>13</sup> However, the latter was the product of the war years and not its aftermath. see Bihari Péter, *Lövészárkok a hátszágban. Középosztály, zsidókérdés, antiszemitizmus az első világháború Magyarországon*, Budapest: Napvilág, 2008.

in those victorious states where more than one national elite tried to find a place within the new construct, especially if they stood on opposing sides during the war, the simultaneous representation of opposite experiences could have posed a threat to the legitimacy of the new state. It was especially poignant in the new Yugoslavia (Svoljšak, Hrstić) where only the battles of the Serbian army and the volunteers fighting with the Entente powers became part of official memory. The memory of the Soča (Isonzo) front was, for example, completely silenced, an especially awkward development if one considers how Fascist Italy, on the opposite side of the border and ruling over the actual battlefields, tried to remind itself and its Slovenians of the battles, often with monumental constructs. In Yugoslavia, only the veterans of the k. u. k army were allowed to cherish their memories, but only at the price of being legally discriminated, for example with pensions.

But conflictual politics of memory was the natural state of affairs in Poland and in the enlarged nation states, too. Slovaks from Hungary soon reinterpreted how Czechoslovakia came into being (Slávka Otčenášová). They emphasised the importance of Slovak elites in state-founding and referred to the conditional and provisory nature of Czechoslovakia that could not exist against the will of its Slovak constituents who demanded more autonomy.<sup>14</sup> Romanian politics was obsessed with debates over the question whether Transylvanian Romanians had shaken off Hungarian domination alone or Romanians from the Old Kingdom had liberated their kin.<sup>15</sup> Finally, the relationship between Poles and Ukrainians in interwar Poland was strained by the memory of their war at the end of 1918 over the city of

<sup>14</sup> See Slávka Otčenášová's contribution in this special issue.

<sup>15</sup> Gábor Egry, 'A Crossroad of Parallels. Regionalism and Nation-Building in Transylvania in the First Half of

the Twentieth Century', in Anders E. Blomqvist, Constantin Iordachi and Balázs Trencsényi (eds.), *Hungary and Romania Beyond National Narratives. Comparisons and Entanglements*, Oxford, Frankfurt: Peter Lang Verlag, 2013, 239–276.

Lwów/Lviv/Lemberg, a locality turned into a *lieux de memoire* on both sides.

The gender aspects of the interwar memory of WWI is presented by Tomasz Pudlocki, while Magda Arsenicz portrays the stakes of the Battle of Lviv/Lwów for today's politics of memory.<sup>16</sup> The memory of women who participated in the war was built mainly on their return to their pre-WWI social roles rather than on the changes the war brought for women in society in general. The memory of the Battle of Lviv oscillates today between a Polish, a Ukrainian and a Polish-Ukrainian one according to the political relations between the two countries. But it is hardly a novel phenomenon. Ukrainian-Polish relations (including the memory of WWI) had already been determined by such political considerations in interwar Poland, especially while an influential circle around Józef Piłsudski, the so-called Prometheans, nurtured the idea of a Greater Poland based on an anti-Soviet Polish-Ukrainian rapprochement; in order to appease their potential allies, they were ready to offer concessions to the Ukrainian minority within Poland.<sup>17</sup>

The relationship of politics of memory to individual and family memory was already problematic before 1945, as the case of the tolerated but officially not supported Yugoslav veterans has demonstrated. Monumentalisation in Hungary, as Zoltán Oszkár Szóts' paper at the conference demonstrated, was dominated by local memorials, even though some corporations, schools or other institutions also erected their own ones. However, these monuments, the first wave of which was erected already in 1917, soon became places of remembrance for the peace treaty of Trianon and the "injustice" that befell Hungary at the end of WWI. It was probably one of the reasons that monumentalizing efforts stopped in 1945 and were not renewed after 1989, either.

The meaning of these memorials is not necessarily fixed but often dependent on local or broader social contexts or individual

<sup>16</sup> See Tomasz Pudlocki and Magda Arsenicz in this special issue.

<sup>17</sup> Timothy Snyder, *Sketches from a Secret War. A Polish Artist's Secret Mission to Liberate Soviet Ukraine*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.



interpretations. The cemeteries of the fallen soldiers in Lviv/Lwów/Lemberg are a case in point, as their accessibility and meaning for the social memory is usually defined by politics. Recently, after the millennium, the Polish cemetery was renovated due to the Polish-Ukrainian political rapprochement. In less exposed localities, however, the situation was reversed, and local customs or memory prevailed over official politics of memory. One such example is provided by Romania. There, communities of the “defeated”, mainly that of Transylvanian Saxons, were permitted to erect their own monuments, although to do so, they were required to integrate into the nationwide framework organisation for monumentalizing and remembrance.<sup>18</sup> Even though the state pursued its own memorialisation policies, and in this effort attempted to prescribe most details of local monuments (often even the ornaments and aesthetics), its efficiency was limited. Local communities, especially the Orthodox and Greek Catholic ones, could attach their traditional rites of burial and mourning to the modern, nationalist monuments, transforming their meaning at once.<sup>19</sup> The official politics of memory still left significant marks on the landscapes with its signs, but just as it was the case with Czechoslovakia and its Czechoslovak Legions or the Yugoslav volunteers, memory was bifurcated. The state cherished the memory of the smaller group of “official” heroes (often also privileged materially), while remembrance for ordinary soldiers of all armies was diffused into the generalised memory of the unknown soldier. Nevertheless, it was probably able to hide the fragmentation of memory due to opposing loyalties during the war (Slovene, Croat vs. Serbian from Serbia; Slovak, Czech vs. Legionaries).

<sup>18</sup> Bernard Böttcher, *Kontinuität des Ersten Weltrkrieges im Frieden? Kriegerdenkmäler und Heldenkult bei den Siebenbürger Sachsen nach 1918.*, in Harald Roth and Mariana Hausleitner (eds.) *Der Einfluss von Faschismus und Nationalsozialismus auf den Minderheiten in Ostmittel und Südosteuropa*, München: IKGS, 2006. Franz Sz. Horvath,

<sup>19</sup> Maria Bucur, *Heroes and Victims. Remembering War in Twentieth Century Romania*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008

The 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary is obviously a conjunctural period of historiography, but the growing attention did not necessarily mean interest in a new interpretation or new aspects of WWI. School textbooks, analysed at the conference by Péter Bihari, Barnabás Vajda and Slávka Otčenášová, suggest that the significance of WWI in national curricula, and consequently in social memory that slowly turns from a communicative to a cultural one, remains limited all over Central and Eastern Europe. Even though the latest textbooks in Hungary devote more space to the social aspects of WWI, including the experience of the hinterland, the focus still lies on military events. However, without a new wave of historical research, the content of the textbooks is hard to change.

The position and social role of historiography is another similarity of the countries of the region. All three generations of WWI historiography – even if less markedly than in the Western historiographies<sup>20</sup> – left their mark on historical writings from the Czech Republic to Croatia, from Poland to Serbia. The appearance of these generations was somewhat belated due to the limitations imposed by official Marxism before 1989 on the one hand, and to accommodation to the new national frameworks following the dissolution of some post-WWI successor states afterwards on the other. That said, the social impact of the war became just as important a topic for research as military operations, although the outcome of WWI still dominates its memory over the war experience. The hiatus in national historiographies is often the result of limited resources rather than the lack of openness, or the still existing agendas of politics of memory that used to reignite old debates.

However, the results of the enthusiasm around the anniversary are diverse. The old issues came to the fore in Serbia and to a certain extent, although for different reasons, in Croatia and Romania, too. Serbian historiography refuted Christopher Clark's thesis about Serbian co-responsibility for the outbreak of the war, and most of its proponents returned to

<sup>20</sup> Jay Winter, Antoine Prost, op. cit.

the traditional view: Serbia was an innocent victim of unjustified aggression. The dismemberment of the Monarchy, thus, was the judgement of history. The debate had some reverberations in Croatia, too, but Croatian historians engaged with it with significantly reduced enthusiasm compared to their Serbian colleagues.

In Romania, the well-known revisionist historian Lucian Boia, who has already been deconstructing with gusto the mythical constructs of the Romanian national historiography, published an essay on the reinterpretation of the war.<sup>21</sup> In this work, he proposed a middle-of-the-road position concerning the responsibility for the war, revising Fritz Fischer's thesis of exclusive German responsibility due to their ambition to become a world power, and critically reassessing the role of Serbian and other nationalist tendencies. His disturbing news for Romanians was his assessment that the emergence of Greater Romania was no historical necessity but an accidental event.

Polish historiography chose another way forward, and some of the works published joined important recent trends in international historiography. Włodzimierz Borodziej and Maciej Górny<sup>22</sup> consciously based on these approaches. Research on the Eastern Front and its hinterland gained significance only recently vis-à-vis the Western theatre of the war, for a long time dominant in historiography. Occupation regimes, their social, economic and cultural aspects have also started to figure only relatively recently in the focus of historical studies, just as it is the case with the subsequent "small world war" in the East and the paramilitary violence.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Lucian Boia, *Primul Război Mondial: paradoxuri, controversă, reînterpretări*, București: Humanitas, 2014.

<sup>22</sup> Włodzimierz Borodziej and Maciej Górny, *Nasza Wojna. Europa Środkowo-Wschonia 1914–1918*, vol. I. Imperia 1912–1916, Warszawa: WAB, 2014

<sup>23</sup> Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, *War Land on The Eastern Front. Culture, National Identity and Occupation in World War I*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000; Robert Gerwarth and John Horne (eds.), *War in Peace. Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012; Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished. Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917–1923*, London: Penguin, 2016; Jochen Böhrer,

The results of research in other countries have not yielded significant monographs so far. Instead, research projects, popularizing activities and conferences show where interest is turning to. It usually includes local social histories that – probably unconsciously – coincided with the German attempts around the anniversary.<sup>24</sup> Another popular research field is the reinterpretation of the end of the war.<sup>25</sup> It does not simply mean the extension of the chronologic boundaries of WWI in Eastern Europe to the end of the Russian civil war or the presentation of paramilitary violence sweeping through societies. The main goal is the analysis of transition (from war to peace, from empires to nation states) in order to reveal continuities and ruptures. Their focus could shift from local to institutional or to certain social groups, like the military,<sup>26</sup> economic organisations<sup>27</sup> or the aristocracy. These also offer a new scale of analysis because it is possible to incorporate such attempts into regional histories as well, as it happened with Upper-Silesia earlier.<sup>28</sup> It is important to note that in most cases, professional historians deliberately

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Włodzimierz Borodziej and Joachim von Puttkamer (eds.) *Legacies of Violence. Eastern Europe's First World War*, München: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2014

<sup>24</sup> Maureen Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire*, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004; Roger Chikering, *Freiburg im Ersten Weltkrieg. Totaler Krieg und städtische Alltag 1914–1918*, Paderborn: Schöningh Verlag, 2009; Ivan Hrstić, *Vrijeme promjena: Makarska 1918–1929.*, Zagreb: Institut društvenih znanosti Ivo Pilar, Grad Makarska, 2013; Birgit Hellmann and Mathias Mieth, *Heimatfront. Eine mitteldeutsche Universitätsstadt im Ersten Weltkrieg*. Jena: Jenaer Stadtmuseum, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Harald Heppner and Martin Švorc, eds. *Veľká doba v malom priestore. Zlomové zmeny v mestách stredoeurópskeho priestoru a ich dôsledky (1918–1929)/ Große Zeit im kleinen Raum. Umbrüche in den Städten des mitteleuropäischen Raumes 1918–1929*, Prešov–Graz: Universum, 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Irina Marin;

<sup>27</sup> Máté Rigó, *Imperial Elites after The Fall of Empires. Business Elites and States in Europe's East and West 1867–1928*, A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Cornell University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Ithaca: Cornell University, Department of History, 2016

<sup>28</sup> T. Hunt Hooley, *National Identity in Weimar Germany. Upper Silesia and the Eastern Borders*, Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1997, Andrzej Michalczyk, *Heimat, Kirche und Nation. Deutsche und polnische Nationalisierungsprozesse im geteilten Oberschlesien 1922–1939*, Köln, Wien, Weimar: Böhlau, 2014

attempt to popularize their results with broader projects of dissemination.<sup>29</sup>

Most of these trends are present in Hungary, too. But apart from a few focused research projects<sup>30</sup>, official politics of memory and its new institutions offer only limited support for such attempts despite significant resources invested in activities. Ad hoc subsidies could not help the institutionalisation of ongoing projects that would be necessary to broaden and deepen their reach within society, contributing to permanent active engagement of citizens with the memory of WWI. The small scale events, projects, venues, whatever their individual merits are, do not form one, two or three strategic research directions. They could still yield quite a few important works until the end of the anniversary years, but without more coordination and conscious cooperation, they risk to result in widely diverging outcomes (also in terms of quality). Instead of presenting a new, broad interpretation of WWI that could generate interest beyond the country's borders, only fragments of a history will emerge.

<sup>29</sup> International Encyclopedia of the First World War, <http://www.1914-1918-online.net/>

<sup>30</sup> Trianon 100, "Negotiation Post-Imperial Transitions 1918-1925. A Comparative Study of Local Transitions from Austria-Hungary to the Successor States", [www.elsovh.hu](http://www.elsovh.hu)