

Jeszenszky, Géza

**Az elveszett presztizs. Magyarország megítélésének megváltozása  
Nagy-Britanniában 1894–1918**

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It is a welcome change that a so far unexploited field such as the history of English–Hungarian relationships has at last aroused the interest of Hungarian historical research.

In his book—as the title says, on “the lost prestige; the change in the British attitude towards Hungary between 1894 and 1918”—Géza Jeszenszky examines the era preceding the disintegration of the Austro–Hungarian Monarchy and the decay of historical Hungary.

In the period, when the Austrian Empire became a dualistic state following the Compromise of 1867, the serious troubles leading to the disintegration of this newly established Austro-Hungarian Monarchy were already evident. First of all, the problem of nationalism must be mentioned. In the second half of the century, the national aspirations of the minorities were gradually gaining strength and spread through wider and wider layers of society. The fact that only Hungary could take part in the government of the Monarchy further strengthened these movements and though at that time secession was not their aim, the idea became an important issue. Nationalism was also a determining factor in the policy of Hungary itself. The Liberal Party which came into power after the Compromise was striving for the assertion of Hungary’s position within the dual system, and when the occasion occurred, they sought domination over Vienna. But in Hungarian political life, of which liberal nationalism and aspiration to great power status were equally characteristic, conservative nationalism was also gradually gaining ground at the end of the nineteenth century, mainly as a consequence of the traditional fear in Hungary of Tzarist Russia. Thus, side by side with the efforts to extend Hungarian national rights, leading politicians tried to prevent the disintegration of the Monarchy and Hungary by oppressing the national minorities, whose demands indirectly embodied the possibility of secession from Austria-Hungary.

The question of nationalism was the cornerstone of Great Britain’s attitude to Hungary. After the Congress of Vienna in 1815, the survival of the Austrian Empire was imperative for Great Britain so as to maintain European *status quo* by the “balance of power” policy. Thus British politicians were against every effort either on the part of the Hungarian oppositionist Independence Party (*Függetlenségi Párt*), or on the part of the other nationalities, that could have resulted in the break-up of the Monarchy.

Jeszenszky starts his study by discussing the reaction to the news of the Austrian–Hungarian Compromise (*kiegyezés*, 1867) in Great Britain. As a whole it met with a favourable reception, but while the conservatives saw it as the biggest concession that could be made to Hungary, more radical politicians and journalists, who were pro-Hungarian since the Liberty war of 1848/49, saw it as the victory of constitutionalism and the guarantee for the Monarchy’s survival. As the Dual Monarchy had proved viable, popular feeling became auspicious by the 1890s., and this prestige even seemed to increase between 1894 and 1904 – to which no doubt, the ousting of Austrian liberals from political power and the Austrian parliamentary crisis of 1897 also contributed. Renowned newspapers and reviews like *The Times* or *The Edinburgh Review* claimed that the subsistence of the Monarchy – and Hungary as part of it – was indispensable in Europe. At that time Hungary was regarded as an ideal constitutional state, and there were even opinions according to which Hungary would gradually take over the lead in the Monarchy.

On the basis of his research, the author takes the view that the first indications for the change of this image were already apparent in 1898 and 1899. First of all, because the parliamentary obstruction tactics of the Hungarian Independence Party were threatening the system with disintegration. Secondly, because such actions destroyed the illusion of Hungary as being a

constitutional state. In addition, certain measures like the decree passed in 1898 which ordered the Magyarization or Hungarian spelling of non-Hungarian placenames for official use in Hungary, turned journalists' and reporters' attention to the fact that it was not only Austria where the nationality question was unsettled, but also Hungary.

After 1903 the attention given to Hungarian events was continuously growing. Although there were still followers of the view that the domination of the Monarchy by Hungary was feasible and even desirable (so that it should act as a retarding force against Germany which was jeopardizing Britain's interests), in Jeszenszky's opinion, the events taking place from 1904 to 1906 led to a considerable loss of Hungarian political prestige.

In 1904 a political crisis began in Hungary, when after almost forty years in power, István Tisza's Liberal Party (*Szabadelvű Párt*) lost its parliamentary majority over the coalition of the opposing parties. This coalition subjected the new government to the introduction of the Hungarian language in the Austro-Hungarian army. This crisis, which lasted until 1906, and the increasingly separatist public sentiment occasioned general anxiety in the liberal British press. In those years both conservative and liberal newspapers and reviews published articles which denied Hungarian constitutionality, called attention to the existing social problems and to the danger of secession caused by the national movements. The new orientation of British policy also contributed to this distrust. The change began back in 1897, when Great Britain gave up the policy it had exercised since the 1830s. The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was a potential ally of Britain in so far as they wanted to prevent the Russian Empire from seizing Constantinople and the Dardanelle Straits. The consequence of this new orientation was the establishment of the British-French *entente cordiale* in 1904. British solidarity with France was confirmed at the Conference of Algeciras in 1906, where it was only the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy that advocated the anti-French Germany. The next stage in the new, pro-French, anti-German British foreign policy was to form the British-Russian alliance in 1907, which put an end to the efforts of those politicians who considered the Monarchy as a possible means of counterbalancing German aspirations to become a great power. In judging the Hungarian political crisis of 1904-1906 the fact that an anti-German group gained ascendancy in the Foreign Office played an important role. However, this view, represented by Francis Bertie, Charles Harding and Eyre Crowe was not the only one. For example, Lord Fitzmaurice, Member of Parliament, a pro-German politician and expert on the Eastern Question, supported the policy of strengthening Hungarian influence. It was he who backed the idea of setting up two consulates, which would have extended British influence in Hungary. But Eyre Crowe, already head of the Western Department of the Foreign Office in 1906, interfered with Lord Fitzmaurice's plans of rapprochement to Germany and to Austria-Hungary.

It was in this period that Henry Wickham Steed, who watched the turn of international events as a correspondent for *The Times* in Vienna from 1902 on, changed his attitude towards the Monarchy and Hungary. The activity of this journalist, who called himself a radical liberal, can be characterized as strongly anti-German from the beginning. Although earlier he thought that Germany's power could be counterbalanced on the Continent by the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, after 1905 he even accepted the idea of suppressing Hungary for stopping Pan-Germanism, and in February, 1906, he believed he had found the solution in a federation of Croats, Rumanians, Slovaks, Bohemians, Poles and Hungarians. But after the Conference of Algeciras, finished in April, 1906, he came to the conclusion that the Monarchy had become a tool serving the interests of German policy. Though he was more and more interested in the international situation, when dealing with Hungary, his attitude, in spite of his hostility, was in accordance with the official position of British foreign policy - he did not want the Monarchy to fall apart until the outbreak of the First World War. In the last year of the war the Foreign Office adopted a new policy. In order to quicken the end of the war, it supported every step that weakened the Monarchy. Then it was Steed who, as a member of the Department of Propaganda in Enemy Countries, organized a conference for the nationalities of the Monarchy in Rome. At this

conference the representatives of the minorities made known their decision concerning their secession and the establishment of independent South Slavic and Czech states in April 1918.

It is a matter of regret that Géza Jeszenszky does not detail Steed's activity and publicism during the war, for as it appears from his book, the journalist played an important role in the shaping of public opinion and in the forming of the new national states.

Beside Steed, who was able to influence English readers through *The Times*, the name of Robert William Seton-Watson has to be mentioned. He made a great impact both on popular sentiment and on official policy as an expert of Eastern European politics. When the politician, who became known throughout the Monarchy during the First World War by his pen-name as *Scotus Viator*, arrived in Vienna as an inquiring young man in 1905, his decision to deal with the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was influenced by the sympathy he felt for the heroes of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848. However, when later he got to know some Slovakian, Rumanian and Croatian politicians, he changed his mind and published a whole series of articles, pamphlets and books sharply criticizing Hungarian policy towards the national minorities,—e.g. *Racial Problems in Hungary* (1908) and *The Southern Slav Question and the Habsburg Monarchy* (1911) *Corruption and Reform in Hungary* (1911) many of which were translated into German, Russian and French.

Unfortunately Hungarian politicians, with the sole exception of Oszkár Jászi, were not able to draw a lesson from his criticism. On the contrary, as the author clearly demonstrates, irrespective of party affiliation, they bitterly attacked Seton-Watson and Steed. This drew the two British journalists' anger upon Hungarian policy, who as a consequence started to bring discredit not only on Hungarian national politics, but on the Hungarian nation, its past and culture as a whole. It must be noted, however, that although their publicism contributed to the fact that Hungarian prestige was lost for a long time, Seton-Watson's point of view, like Steed's, was in accordance with the official British policy till the First World War. That is, he did not strive for the breaking up of the Monarchy, but, again like Steed, he concerned himself with the idea of federalism. However, he changed his opinion almost immediately after the outbreak of the war, and contrary to his former efforts, (according to which he championed the Croats against the Serbian imperialist ambitions) after the murder of crown heir Francis Ferdinand he made every effort to set up a Serbian state which would have included Croatia. It was then that he found himself opposed to the policy of the Foreign Office, as Great Britain wanted to maintain the Monarchy even in January, 1918, and Seton-Watson's applications for the role of official mediator were politely rejected. Yet the political activities of Seton-Watson and Steed, "greatly contributed to the process of disintegration of the Monarchy" as Géza Jeszenszky points out, and the facts and analyses which they collected and published — often without selection and criticism — were the bases on which the Peace Treaty of Trianon after the First World War (a treaty which dispossessed Hungary of many million Hungarians), was drawn up.

Between the two World Wars Seton-Watson, who was then professor of East European history at London University, making good use of his newly acquired knowledge, published several books on the history of the minorities of former Hungary. Considered to be a scholarly expert, his publications were quoted almost without exception to support the facts of new studies written on the history of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

Through the examination of the press, diplomatic relations and other personal connections of the period, Géza Jeszenszky follows the change of the British image of Hungary with careful detail up to 1914. It is much to be regretted that he does not deal with the activities of Seton-Watson following the outbreak of the war, for Seton-Watson's contribution to the disintegration of the Monarchy would justify the extension. Such a study becomes more significant when one considers that it was this period, between 1914–1918, that seems to be the most decisive in the loss of prestige of Hungary in British eyes.