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Habsburg Paradox: Decision in Austria-Hungary, January-March 1918

The article offers a brief study of the final months of the Dual Monarchy from the central perspective of the Habsburg government, utilizing as many relevant sources as feasible. While the German Empire's preeminent role in the policies and campaigns that determined the outcome of the First World War cannot be denied, the independent nature of Austro-Hungarian policy initiatives — not infrequently at odds with those pursued by its German ally — stands out in any detailed examination of the subject. Similarly, the complexity and durability of internal loyalties to the Habsburg state, apparent in any number of contexts, argue for a more optimistic assessment of its viability well into 1918. While specialized scholars focusing on the Habsburg state have been more likely to grant the Empire the benefit of the doubt, somehow this is not percolating out to the more general studies of the war that have been appearing in abundance in recent years. By examining the complex range of issues enveloping the wartime Austro-Hungarian state from the vantage point of the institution charged with their management, namely the Habsburg government itself, some deficiencies can be remedied. This central perspective provides context for wartime decision-making as well as post-war assessment of those decisions. It provides a relatively stable setting — in the midst of tremendous change and instability — for understanding the unfolding crisis of Austro-Hungarian government between 1914 and 1918 and the remedies proposed and undertaken by its civil servants, as well as their interpretation of the reasons for their ultimate failure. The dissolution of the Habsburg state created a void where a great empire had stood for centuries, a void filled by new nation states still struggling to assert their rights and, in some cases, their legitimacy a century later. Even as our culture today wrestles with both the legacy and dangerous potentials of nationalism, certainly the ultimate multinational state of modern history deserves some reappraisal. What better perspective to begin that process than the policies, the loyalties, and the assessments of those who worked for that state's preservation in the time of its greatest trial.

As the year 1918 began, the Austro-Hungarian Empire seemingly embodied two incongruent realities. On the one hand, the Dual Monarchy exhibited the scars of three and half years of brutal war. More than one million Habsburg soldiers were dead and millions more maimed or prisoners, shortages of essentials at home were reaching crisis levels, and restless nationalities seemed poised to assert their independence. On the other hand, Austro-Hungarian armies stood secure on every battlefront. Serbia, Montenegro, and Romania had been defeated and occupied,

Italy stymied, and Russia forced into revolution and peace negotiations. The battered but resilient Dual Monarchy looked as if it might escape the war intact, even victorious. Instead, less than eleven months later it had ceased to exist. This paradox confronts historians assessing the Habsburg state in the final year of the Great War.

Of course, in that precipitous plunge from apparent victory to overwhelming defeat, Austria-Hungary shared the fate of Germany and the other Central Powers. Yet in another sense, the Dual Monarchy's fate in the First World War was unique. Alone among the European Great Powers, the Habsburg state suffered not simply a change of government or the loss of some outlying territories, but the permanent fragmentation of its land and peoples and the complete collapse of the institutional structures that maintained it as a sovereign entity. In November 1918, an empire that had dominated East Central Europe for four centuries simply vanished. In its place emerged an assortment of states organized to a greater or lesser degree on the principle of nationality. Their continuing struggle for stability and even legitimacy in the century since 1918 highlights the significance of the multinational state's dissolution.

Great War historians have conventionally portrayed the Dual Monarchy's collapse as the inevitable outcome of historical processes, chiefly the erosion of archaic dynasticism and the upsurge of the nationalism embodied in its successor states. Many also point to German domination of wartime Austro-Hungarian policy, claiming that Habsburg independence was forfeit long before 1918. With these premises in place, the dissolution of Austria-Hungary seemingly required little assessment; the obsolete Monarchy received just punishment for denying the natural right of national self-determination and for aiding and abetting German militarism. The complete collapse of the Habsburg state also left the interpretation of its immediate past essentially in the hands of either the victors abroad or the nationalities at home that were heir to its territories. Neither could be objective in their assessment, and both had a tremendous stake in asserting the legitimacy of the Dual Monarchy's destruction. Portraying its internal national problems as insurmountable and its government as a pawn of German militarism clearly served that end. It is worth noting that the very complexity of Habsburg multinationalism and the relative obscurity of many of its peoples — viewed from the Western European or American perspective — contributed to this development.

More recent studies of the war have done little re-evaluation of these older, traditional perspectives. Describing the Brusilov offensive of 1916, one author claims, "The disaster at Lutsk to all intents and purposes marked the end of Austria-Hungary as a great and independent power."[1] Other accounts of the war routinely refer to Germany alone in operations and policies that directly involved

[1] HERWIG 1997: 213.

the Austro-Hungarians and disparage overall Habsburg competence and independence. One recently acclaimed revisionist account, assessing German failures, states, "The gamble on alliance with Austria also went wrong."[2] Consciously or not, this disdain echoes the haughty views of contemporary German military leaders. Erich von Ludendorff complained that the Dual Monarchy and its army did not accomplish "even half of what could properly have been expected of them" and lamented that it was "fatal for us that we were allied with decaying states like Austria-Hungary."[3] In each of these assessments, the Dual Monarchy is viewed as an appendage of German power, as an asset whose purpose is to assist the Germans in their war effort rather than as an independent state with its own priorities. Indeed, the valuation of states based on military prowess alone reveals perhaps as much about our own culture — so much a product of the modernism birthed by the war and the worldview of people like Ludendorff — as it does about the realities of 1914-1918.

This, perhaps, explains why Austria-Hungary's collapse is still largely viewed as the product of unrelenting incompetence and submissiveness in all areas of policy and war, or even as preordained by forces beyond its control. Yet this appraisal ignores far too many of the complexities and realities that mark the paradox of 1918 and the breakup of the multinational empire. Without disputing the German Empire's preeminent role in the policies and campaigns that determined the outcome of the war, the independent nature of Austro-Hungarian policy initiatives — not infrequently at odds with those pursued by its German ally — stands out in any detailed examination of the subject. Similarly, the complexity and durability of internal loyalties to the Habsburg state, apparent in any number of contexts, argue for a more optimistic assessment of its viability well into 1918. As East Central Europe marks the centennial of Austria-Hungary's dissolution, this seems an appropriate moment to summon up fresh perspectives.

We might learn much, in fact, by examining the complex range of issues enveloping the Austro-Hungarian state as it entered the last year of the war from the vantage point of the institution charged with their management, namely the Habsburg government itself. This central perspective provides a relatively stable setting — in the midst of tremendous change and instability — for understanding the unfolding crisis of the Austro-Hungarian state and the remedies proposed and undertaken by its servants in a more contemporary, real time context. It also provides balance. With so much post-war scholarship highlighting the centrifugal forces of nationalism and modernism, the centripetal elements of the Dual Monarchy's institutional structures and personal loyalties that held the state together through

[2] FERGUSON 1999: 285.

[3] LUDENDORFF 1919: 138.

four years of unprecedented hardship and strain demand more attention. In fact, the views of prominent government figures regarding the priorities and goals of wartime Habsburg policy proved as various as their faith in the traditions and future of the Dual Monarchy was consistent. With few exceptions, the chief civil servants of Austria-Hungary believed in the continued federation of Danubian peoples as a viable and desirable aim. They generally did not see the war as the beginning of the inevitable end, and their wartime initiatives and post-war assessments bear that out.

Before addressing some of the key issues confronting Habsburg leaders in the crucial first months of 1918, examining some of their overarching post-mortems and generalized appraisals seems relevant. Baron István Burián von Rajecz, the longest serving Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister during the war, asserted in his memoirs, "We, the official protectors of the venerable structure [of the Habsburg Empire], were convinced of its adaptability to new developments."[4] Dr. Karl Renner, the much more progressive Austrian Socialist leader who went on to serve as President of the Austrian Republic after both world wars, also embraced the greater purpose served by the multinational empire. In 1917 he wrote, "Therefore, the smaller nations have every reason to abolish the inequality of their natural existence, their defencelessness and helplessness alongside the greater nations, by joining a supranational association based on law. Such an association cannot eliminate their natural inequality, yet it can guarantee them continued existence and the ability to act on the world stage."[5] Prince Lajos Windischgrätz, the Hungarian Food Supply Minister in 1918, similarly described the Austro-Hungarian Empire as "the only possible organism of the Danube countries adapted to the requirements of the various peoples."[6] While one might be tempted to reject these assessments as biased or self-serving, what stands out upon closer examination is their realistic appraisal of the challenges confronting the Dual Monarchy. These individuals were not blind to the crises brought on by the war. Indeed, many stood at the centre of struggles to address specific challenges in areas like provisioning, peace-making, and governance. Nevertheless, they still believed solutions could be found that served the dynasty and the people it governed. Burián wrote, "Simply to speak of the sickness and decay of Austria-Hungary, as was often done within and without its boundaries, did not meet the case. What the course of development revealed were not symptoms of decay, but the exuberant expansion and development of the parts within a framework that required expansion. For this, extensive provision should and could have been made without damaging the essential interests of the whole."[7] The controversial General Edmund Glaise-

4 BURIÁN VON RAJECZ 1925: 164.

5 RENNER 1918: 148.

6 WINDISCHGRÄTZ 1921: 344.

7 BURIÁN VON RAJECZ 1925: 164.

Horstenau, who went on to join the Austrian Nazis but also denounced Ustaše atrocities in Yugoslavia, concluded, "Throughout the early years of the war, even in districts where nationalism was strongest, only a relatively small section of the educated classes hoped for the destruction of the empire. Although the empire had not given them the fullest scope for the development of their national traditions, its destruction was not desired by the majority of the peoples to whom it afforded security and the means to live prosperously and happily."[8]

Putting these generalized appraisals to the test requires the creation of manageable parameters. For this study, I propose examining specific issues and government responses in the first three months of 1918, focusing on the essential areas of sustainability, in terms of both military cohesiveness and domestic provisioning, and peace-making efforts, both with the revolutionary governments of the East and with the Entente powers. Of course, these are interrelated issues, perhaps nowhere else so much as in the endlessly complex Habsburg state. That interrelationship confronted Austro-Hungarian leaders, but so did the uncompromising priorities of each issue. Ultimately, the choices forced by the tension and competition between these discrete areas in the first months of 1918 determined the fate of the Dual Monarchy later that year.

The issue of sustainability in military matters has received a fair amount of attention, although much of it coloured by the German-centric perspectives noted earlier. With the possible exception of Italy, Austria-Hungary was the least prepared of the Great Powers for the outbreak of the World War. Its military spending was the lowest of all the major European states and its preparedness further compromised by traditionalism and decentralization. Without becoming embroiled in assessments of Austro-Hungarian military competence or incompetence, there can be no doubt that the Habsburg army frequently performed poorly and suffered immensely. Its extraordinarily high losses, especially in the opening campaigns of 1914 and early 1915 and especially among its pre-war professional officer class, quickly reduced it to a shell.[9] The results were predictable, as hastily raised replacements of every ethnicity led by newly anointed officers speaking only German or Magyar were rushed to the fronts in 1915-1917. The military also inflicted widespread suffering in other areas by acting as an instrument for the repression of the Dual Monarchy's own peoples at home, thereby poisoning the political climate in the provinces under military control while encouraging authorities elsewhere to overreact to minor nationalist incidents. The military's agents and administrators created an atmosphere of bitterness and suspicion all out of proportion to actual concerns, and nationalist propagandists abroad took

[8] GLAISE-HORSTENAU 1930: 4.

[9] By April 1915, total casualties from all causes reached approximately 2 million. See OTTO-SCHMIEDEL 1977: 133.

full advantage to portray the Habsburg government as the ruthless enslaver of its nationalities.[10]

Despite these difficulties, the army survived, war production increased, and incidents of desertion remained surprisingly low until spring 1918. The apparent mass desertions among the 28th Prague Infantry Regiment in April 1915 — themselves likely a product of pacifist and socialist sentiments and extraordinarily poor leadership more than national disaffection — were exceptional rather than the norm.[11] Indeed, Habsburg leaders were often surprised by the patriotic enthusiasm generated by the outbreak of war among presumably disgruntled nationalities like the Czechs. Norman Stone cites the report of the IV Army command passing through Bohemia in the initial mobilization describing the enthusiastic welcome of the populace.[12] Glaise-Horstenau asserts, "Until shortly before the Armistice, Croatian, Slovenian, and Slovakian regiments proved themselves not only thoroughly trustworthy, but amongst the best fighters in the imperial armies, while Southern Slavs as a whole looked upon Italians as the arch-enemies of their race and upon the Isonzo campaign as their own war."[13] In his study of the Austro-Hungarian army, Jay Luvaas points out, "Some of the national groups, especially the Poles and the Czechs, gave the war effort undivided support, and the later growth of the Czech Corps which fought against the Austrians should not obscure the fact that for the first three years the Czech soldiers fought well. Not until late in 1917 did the Czech Legion boast more than a few hundred men."[14] In the case of the Poles (and Ruthenes), extremely harsh Russian occupation policies in Galicia did much to solidify the inhabitants' dedication to the Dual Monarchy. This evident patriotic durability seems all the more remarkable when compared with the virtual disintegration of the Russian army by summer 1917 and mass mutinies in the French army earlier that spring. If any soldiers had an excuse for such war weariness and general disaffection, it would seem likely Austro-Hungarians could claim top prize. Nevertheless, the multinational army — and navy, which arguably performed its roles with more success than its land-based counterpart did — held on and remained viable through three and a half years of war.

That began to change, to be sure, in 1918. Renewed Magyar demands for a separate army — a perennial issue between Vienna and Budapest — unleashed such a firestorm that Emperor Karl summoned a conference of Austrian and Hungarian government and military leaders on January 9, 1918 at Laxenburg. Hungarian proposals provoked Austrian warnings of "a political discussion in the

10 See FÜHR 1968.

11 See ZEMAN 1961: 52-57.

12 STONE 1998: 126.

13 GLAISE-HORSTENAU 1930: 4.

14 LUVAAS 1977: 87-103.

trenches" and the dangers of tampering with "the highest symbol and strongest instrument for the Great Power position of the Monarchy." After much fruitless debate, Karl adjourned the meeting with the injunction that the issue not be raised again until the war was over.[15] Another fracture appeared on February 1 when a serious mutiny erupted among ships based at Cattaro on the Adriatic Sea. Largely manned by South Slav ratings, the navy's morale had held up despite much enforced idleness dictated by the Entente's blockade of the Adriatic and the naval command's reluctance to take unnecessary risks. Sailors' committees hoisted red flags and demanded peace without annexations, demobilization, democratization of the regime and national self-determination, as well as a government reply to American President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points. More specifically, they also demanded better and more equitable distribution of food, regular leave, and general improvements in conditions. The mutiny collapsed two days later after a counterattack led mostly by German and Hungarian crewmembers and the arrival of loyal ships from Pola. Forty sailors were tried, four executed, and over eight hundred removed from the fleet for concerns about questionable loyalty. A shakeup of the naval high command followed.[16]

These two issues of Hungarian military independence and the Cattaro mutiny point to the intense strains that had developed in the multinational fabric of the military by early 1918. However, their significance should not be exaggerated. Internal political manoeuvrings in Budapest more than genuine Magyar-centrism drove the separate army issue, while the mutiny at Cattaro appeared rooted more in poor conditions and a general desire for peace than ethnic divisions. While worse indications of military disaffection followed, they generally reflected developments over which the military exercised no direct control. For example, when news broke of the signing of a peace treaty between the Central Powers and the newly recognized state of the Ukraine on February 9 at the expense of Polish interests, General Josef Haller, commander of the Polish Auxiliary Corps, mutinied with several of his units at their cantonments near Czernowitz. Surrounded by Magyar, Croat, and Czech units east of Sadagora on February 16, a skirmish ensued that left eleven dead and thirty-eight wounded among the loyal troops and 3231 Polish prisoners. Haller and a few hundred Poles managed to fight their way out and cross into Russian lines. Frustrated Polish nationalism stood at the centre of the mutiny, but whatever the cause, Austro-Hungarian troops had engaged in fratricidal battle for the first time in the war.[17]

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15 Minutes of the Meeting of January 9, 1918, Kabinetts Archiv, Carton 24, alt. 22, Geheimakten, *AT-OeStA/HHStA*, Vienna.

16 See HALPERN 1994: 170-171.

17 Report of the Army High Command to the Foreign Ministry regarding the Mutiny of the Polish Auxiliary Corps, February 24, 1918, Politsches Archiv I, Carton 1027, Liasse Krieg 56, Polen, *AT-OeStA/HHStA*.

After the conclusion of the final Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on March 2 effectively ended Austria-Hungary's war without bringing it the peace its soldiers and citizens craved, trouble in the now mostly idle army began mounting steadily. The return of former prisoners of war from Russia beginning at the end of the month exacerbated the problem immensely, as Bolshevik propaganda had worked steadily on these prisoners — particularly ethnic Germans and Magyars not as susceptible to nationalist appeals — while in captivity. Screening camps set up at the frontiers proved woefully inadequate, and bands of returning soldiers sometimes deserted and formed gangs that eroded government authority and spread lawlessness in the provinces. The eventual return of most of the returning POWs to the active army actually proved disastrously counterproductive, as their low morale and political sympathies badly corroded discipline in existing units. The first mutinies among regular troops erupted in mid-May, followed by a steady flow of mutinies and desertions until the end of the war. However, the Austro-Hungarian forces on the Italian front, drawn from all corners of the Monarchy and despite crippling shortages of food and equipment, continued to fight well until the final collapse at the end of October. The same held true for the naval forces after the debacle of Cattaro.[18]

What to conclude, then, about the issue of military sustainability? Objective assessment would seem to indicate that the military largely lived up to its historical role as a loyal and unifying force in the Dual Monarchy and remained in part a viable force until the final collapse. Only after other factors — food shortages, betrayal of national aspirations and hopes for general peace, return of masses of demoralized former prisoners of war — combined to overwhelm habitual loyalties did the military begin a steady decline. However, this occurred quite late, reaching serious dimensions only in late spring 1918. That the army, in particular, could suffer such tremendous losses and overcome so many disastrous defeats with its overall morale and fighting ability intact until the last weeks of the war is remarkable. In fact, only the final breakup of the state it served ultimately destroyed the Austro-Hungarian military. Unlike the German High Command, the Habsburg military also remained a servant of the state and seized control of neither government nor policy. The very successes and strengths of the German army that have attracted such admiration in accounts of the war led to Hindenburg's and Ludendorff's usurpation of civilian control of policy in Germany by 1917, with disastrous results. No such military coup occurred in Austria-Hungary, and the Habsburg Emperor retained his hold on policy until the end, ultimately handing off control to the nationalities more or less peacefully.

Sustainability in the domestic arena was notably less successful. In fact, the collapse of the food supply system in the Austrian sphere of the Dual Monarchy

[18] See ZEMAN 1961: 142-146.

by early 1918 arguably determined Habsburg policies and provoked disastrous developments in every other area under consideration. The first problem was declining yields. Between 1909 and 1913, Austria-Hungary produced an annual average of over 104 million quintals of wheat and rye, which sufficed to meet domestic demand. The war, however, immediately introduced a deficit between supply and demand. In 1914, that deficit already totalled 9.8 million quintals, rising to 20.6 million in 1915, 37.1 million in 1916, and 37.8 million in 1917. Put simply, the Monarchy could no longer feed itself. Declining wartime yields plagued most belligerent countries as mass conscription left fields untended and draught animals were lost to the armies' insatiable demands for transport. In the case of the Central Powers, the Entente's blockade also caused growing shortages of fertilizer and machinery, and of course prevented importation of food from abroad. Heavy fighting in Galicia and the Bukovina from 1914 until mid-1917 also ravaged one of Austria-Hungary's major agricultural areas.[19]

Aggravating this problem was the steady deterioration of the transportation network under the strains of war. Loss of railroad workers to the armies, lack of sufficient coal for locomotives, enemy capture of locomotives and railway cars, along with exhaustion of supplies for repair and new construction, led to a steady decline of serviceable rolling stock and sharp reductions in the load capacity of track. Demands, meanwhile, continued to increase. Transport of military personnel increased from 6.8 million in the first half of 1914 to 21.9 million in 1916-1917.[20] As the Monarchy became steadily more dependent on food obtained from occupied enemy territory, the railroads were worked even harder. Of course, military priorities also dictated that transport of provisions to the citizenry take second place to movement of troops and their supplies. The military requisitioned over fifty percent of Austro-Hungarian rolling stock for the Caporetto offensive alone in autumn 1917. The effects of all of this were crippling. By late 1917, Vienna was receiving only twenty to fifty of the required 300 carloads of potatoes per day.[21]

This intensifying provisioning crisis affected the two spheres of the Dual Monarchy unequally, however. In peacetime, Cisleithania, and especially Vienna, depended heavily on imports of cereal grains and animal products to feed its populace. The Austrian sphere's deficit amounted to an average of 32 percent of total need in flour, 71 percent in beef and lard, and 52 percent in pork. Transleithania supplied nearly all of this. Thus, import-dependent Austria suffered disproportionately from the mounting shortages of wartime. Austrian government officials instituted a system of compulsory rationing in February 1915, while the Hungarians did not follow suit for nearly a year. Hungarian yields, of course, declined along

19 WARGELIN 2000: 262.

20 ENDERES 1931: 79.

21 WEGS 1997: 128.

with the rest of the Monarchy, but not nearly so dramatically as in the Austrian sphere. The 1913 Hungarian harvest of 59.7 million quintals of grain fell to only 43.6 million by 1917, whereas the Austrian harvest dropped from 42.3 million to 18.6 million quintals in the same period. Most strikingly, in that same period Hungarian exports of grain and flour to Austria fell from a peacetime average of 21.2 million quintals to a paltry 500,000.[22] The crisis in Cisleithania challenged the very basis of Dualist government, appearing regularly on the agenda of the Common Ministerial Council, composed of the highest representatives of the Austrian and Hungarian spheres. In fact, close to a quarter of the forty-one wartime meetings dealt wholly or partially with provisioning issues. Hungarian government officials never honestly acknowledged the evident disparities between the two parts of the Dual Monarchy, at times contradicting their own official figures and always pushing back against Austrian requests for aid. The official in charge of Austrian provisioning, Hans Loewenfeld-Russ, reflected after the war, "Through its distinctly selfish provisioning policy during the war, which took no account of Austria, Hungary renounced both the balance of common economic concerns and the concept of an equal distribution of supplies to the populations of both states."[23]

While the developing problems within the Habsburg military did not seriously impair its effectiveness until well into 1918, the provisioning crisis in Austria had immediate and devastating consequences when it came to a head in January 1918. The daily flour ration for Austrian city-dwellers had remained relatively stable at around 200 grams since the introduction of rationing in 1915, although in practice that amount was rarely available and substitutes, especially potatoes, made up the difference. In 1917, with the potato harvest less than half of peacetime levels, the daily flour ration dropped to 175 grams in April and to 165 grams in August. Then, in January 1918, with the Monarchy's overstrained railroad network breaking down, the ration was cut in half to 82.5 grams. A month earlier, meanwhile, the ration for Hungarian city-dwellers had been raised from a wartime low of 210 grams to 233 grams.[24] On January 14, as word of the new ration became public, starving workers in Wiener Neustadt, south of Vienna, went on strike. Within two days, the strike spread to all of Lower Austria and the Imperial capital itself. By January 18, workers in vital industries in Upper Austria, Hungary, Galicia, and Moravia brought production to a halt. Overall, more than a million workers walked off the job. Their demands were simple — bread and peace.[25]

While ominous enough as an expression of desperation by starving and war weary people, the strikes also threatened the Monarchy in the crucial area of

[22] WARGELIN 2000: 264-266.

[23] LOEWENFELD-RUSS 1986: 36.

[24] GRATZ-SCHÜLLER 1930: 81. See also WARGELIN 2000: 274-275.

[25] See PLASCHKA-HASELSTEINER-SUPPAN 1974: 59-106.

peace-making. Negotiations had been proceeding at Brest-Litovsk between representatives of the Central Powers and the Russian Bolsheviks since mid-December 1917. Beginning in early January, the Central Powers also initiated talks with representatives of the newly independent Ukrainian state in order to put more pressure on the Russian negotiators. For the Habsburg government, these new negotiations increasingly represented a straw to be grasped. A treaty with the Ukraine would bring the first concrete evidence that the war might be drawing to a close, and with war weariness reaching crisis proportions in Austria-Hungary this opportunity became the priority for Foreign Minister Ottokar Czernin von und zu Chudenitz. As the negotiations progressed, the Ukrainians also promised to deliver grain to the starving Monarchy. By mid-January, both peace and bread had become urgent priorities. Czernin recognized this reality. On January 16, he warned Karl that, unless the provisioning situation improved, he would be compelled to conclude a peace under "infamous circumstances." The Russian delegation appeared to be stalling deliberately, anticipating the outbreak of revolution in the Dual Monarchy, while the Ukrainians were demanding territorial concessions in occupied Poland as well as in the Monarchy itself. Czernin emphasized that obtaining sufficient food supplies was now "the most important problem of domestic policy, behind which all other tasks must unquestionably recede."[26] The next day, Karl replied to Czernin, "I must once again most urgently impress upon you that the entire fate of the Monarchy and the dynasty depends on the earliest possible conclusion of peace at Brest-Litovsk…. If the peace at Brest does not become reality, then there will be revolution here no matter how much there is to eat."[27]

The issue of peace-making, however, involved more than Ukrainians or Russians. Ultimately, of course, the Central Powers obtained favourable treaties with both, but to no avail in the long term. While the urgent need for grain and some kind of peace drove Habsburg policies in the first weeks of 1918, the question remained of how to extricate the Dual Monarchy from the larger war. This highlights another area where hindsight and historical tunnel vision have coloured our views. While the members of the respective belligerent alliances generally drew closer to each other during the war, the image of unified blocs pursuing congruent policies distorts reality. Each nation went to war for its own reasons and with its own expectations. In fact, in many ways the First World War was composed of several smaller wars between rival states. This can be readily seen in the Bolshevik separate peace initiative as well as in the various delayed declarations of war among belligerents. For instance, Italy declared war on Austria-Hungary on May

[26] Czernin to Demblin, January 16, 1918, Politisches Archiv I, Carton 818, *AT-OeStA/HHStA*.

[27] Demblin to Czernin, January 17, 1918, Politisches Archiv I, Carton 1081, *AT-OeStA/HHStA*

23, 1915, but was not technically at war with Germany until August 28, 1916. These situations meant that the war efforts of alliance members were frequently out of step, their loyalties to each other transient, and their outlook on issues like peace anything but uniform.

In the case of the United States, the timing of American belligerency is especially significant. While the United States declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917, it remained at peace with Austria-Hungary until December 7 of that year. In part, this simply reflected the ostensible reason for American intervention, namely, the German unrestricted submarine campaign. However, it also represented the rather ambivalent Entente attitude towards the Dual Monarchy, which America's entry into the war highlighted even more. While Entente propagandists fed their publics a steady diet of atrocity stories and outrage condemning the German Empire's militarism and sinister goals, they largely neglected Austria-Hungary. This relative leniency reflected in part the reluctance of the Entente governments to endorse the dissolution or drastic reduction of the Monarchy, despite obligations to allies like Italy and Serbia. Perennial concerns about Russian ambitions in the Balkans and Mediterranean — conveniently set aside in the agreements of 1915 — did not find relief with the Bolshevik coup, which only emphasized the importance of maintaining some sort of status quo in the area. Additionally, Austria-Hungary represented a potential "weak link" in the Central Powers alliance that some Entente leaders, as well as Woodrow Wilson, hoped might be coaxed into a separate peace that would ensure Germany's defeat. In other words, the Dual Monarchy's very lack of militaristic success or global ambitions made it less threatening and considerably less demonized than Germany. The Dual Monarchy might therefore have both found and provided an avenue to peace.

Emperor Karl had indicated his desire for peace upon his accession in November 1916, pledging to "put an end to the horrors and sacrifices of the War at the earliest possible moment."[28] Peace talks between Austria-Hungary and the Entente began in spring 1917 with the famous Sixtus negotiations involving Karl's brother-in-law; these ultimately collapsed, but not before Karl wrote a letter to Sixtus recognizing "the just French claims relative to Alsace-Lorraine."[29] New initiatives quickly followed. The son-in-law of Empress Zita's mother, Count Nicholas Revertera, met with Count Abel Armand, a family friend and intelligence officer on the French General Staff, in Switzerland in August. The French, who failed to notify either the Italians or Americans of the talks or of their offers to the Austro-Hungarians, tried to tempt Karl with extensive territorial compensation in Poland and Germany in exchange for a separate peace and concessions to Italy. Karl refused. He hoped throughout 1917 to persuade the Germans to agree to

[28] POLZER-HODITZ 1931: 111.

[29] DE MANTEYER 1921: 83-84.

a compromise general peace in exchange for territory in the East, but with the military directing German policy and Russia in process of collapse, the Germans insisted on pursuing decisive victory. When the Revertera talks collapsed, the British picked up where the French had left off, dispatching a member of Lloyd George's cabinet, General Jan Smuts, to Geneva on December 18-19 for talks with the former Ambassador to Britain, the respected diplomat Count Albert von Mensdorff-Pouilly. The obstacles remained the same. The first sentence of Czernin's written instructions to Mensdorff read, "It would be a waste of time to talk about concluding a separate peace."[30] Smuts, for his part, was forbidden to discuss anything but a separate peace with Austria-Hungary and repeated in more nebulous terms the territorial inducements suggested by Armand in August. When Mensdorff attempted to steer the conversation in the direction of a general peace, Smuts rebuffed him, saying, "The feeling in England is not yet ripe for direct conversations with Germany."[31] That same month, the Italian government — thoroughly demoralized in the aftermath of Caporetto — broke off talks exploring a separate peace with the Central Powers only under the threat of French and British censure.[32]

The peace-making options confronting the Dual Monarchy at the beginning of 1918 were thus sharply at odds with each other. Czernin received the reports of Mensdorff's meetings as he was preparing for the first discussions with the Russians at Brest-Litovsk. The refusal of the French or British to entertain the possibility of general peace negotiations doubtless reinforced his determination first to try to finesse the Germans into moderate terms in the East and then see if a general peace might emerge out of that. This was increasingly wishful thinking by January 1918. The other option, pursuing a separate peace with the Entente, meant abandoning the German alliance at the very moment of victory in the East and relying alternatively on the Entente's promises of dynastic and territorial preservation — indeed expansion — once Germany was defeated. The choices were polar opposites, but they were both still options.

Czernin's last effort to squeeze moderation out of the German high command came at a meeting in Berlin on February 5. Surprisingly, given his clear opposition to a separate peace, Czernin asked the Germans bluntly, "Up to what point is the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy required to persevere in the war at the side of its German ally, or when and under what circumstances does it have the right to sit at

30 Directive for the Impending Meetings, undated (December 1917), Politisches Archiv I, Carton 963, *AT-OeStA/HHStA*

31 Mensdorff to Czernin, Reports of the Meeting with General Smuts, December 19-20, 1917, Carton 963, *AT-OeStA/HHStA*

32 See the reports of these overtures in Politsches Archiv I, Carton 956, Liasse Krieg 25, Friedensverhandlungen, *AT-OeStA/HHStA*

the negotiating table?" In the Foreign Minister's view, there was "not the slightest doubt" that the Monarchy was obligated to fight on only for the restoration of the territorial status quo ante bellum and was in no way bound to fight for German conquests. When the Germans temporized, Czernin went further, "When does Austria-Hungary have the right to initiate separate peace negotiations? When are we allowed to sit at the green table? How long are we absolutely bound to participate in the military operations of our ally?"[33] The response from General Ludendorff was brutal and uncompromising. He stated simply, "If Germany makes peace without profit then Germany has lost the war."[34]

This was the crucial moment. While the striking workers in Austria had largely returned to their jobs, the threat of renewed internal upheaval lay heavily on Habsburg leaders. Czernin concluded that the Monarchy could not afford to let at least some kind of peace slip away. Giving up on German moderation as a potential road to a compromise peace and feeling compelled by the food crisis to act quickly and decisively, he agreed — with the approval of Karl as well as Austrian and Hungarian leaders — to the terms presented by the Ukrainians. On February 9, the Central Powers and the Ukraine concluded the first treaty of peace of the war. In a secret clause already approved, the government in Kiev pledged to supply the Central Powers with a minimum of one million tons of grain by August 1. Karl wired Czernin, "With all my heart I impart to you, my dear Count Czernin, my thanks for your resolute and successful work. With this, you have given me the happiest day of a reign otherwise filled with worry, and I beseech Almighty God that he may continue to give you aid on the hard road leading to the prosperity of the Monarchy and its peoples."[35]

Of course, placating the Ukrainian peace delegates cost the Monarchy the loyalty of its heretofore-loyal Polish subjects. Waves of strikes and mass demonstrations erupted all over Poland and Galicia when news of the territorial terms of the treaty surfaced. The entire Polish Council of Ministers resigned, the Polish Club in the Austrian Parliament called for the overturning of the treaty and for Poles to work for unity and sovereignty, and, as previously noted, the Polish Auxiliary Corps mutinied. Prince Lubomirski of the Polish Regency Council denounced the "fourth partition of Poland" and accused the Habsburg government of "selling Poland for a few carloads of grain."[36] Despite Czernin's efforts to backtrack out of the mess, especially once the Kievan government's impotence became clear, the damage

[33] Minutes of the Berlin Meeting of February 5, 1918, Politisches Archiv I, Carton 504, *AT-OeStA/HHStA*

[34] Diary entry of February 5, 1918. CZERNIN 1919: 247

[35] Demblin to Czernin, February 9, 1918, Politisches Archiv I, Carton 1079, *AT-OeStA/HHStA*

[36] Ugron to the Foreign Ministry, February 10, 1918, Politisches Archiv I, Carton 1040, *AT-OeStA/HHStA*

proved irreversible. Any efforts to use Poland as the lever for restructuring the Monarchy or for proving the viability of multi-national loyalties — particularly in the face of Czech and South Slav parliamentary declarations in January calling for independent states — were doomed.

However, this was not immediately clear to the Entente, which continued to dangle Poland before the Dual Monarchy as an inducement to obtain peace. Peace initiatives from the Entente continued in the first months of 1918, only ending with the launching of the massive German military offensive in France on March 21. On February 2, Count Revertera reported renewed contacts with representatives of the French government in which they reportedly desired high-level official negotiations with a representative of the Habsburg government, preferably Czernin himself, with the aim of negotiating a compromise peace.[37] Czernin's strong stance for compromise at the Berlin meeting on February 5 likely resulted from this news. However, the most intriguing meeting took place outside Bern, Switzerland on February 3-4. The meeting between Professor George Herron, an unofficial representative of President Wilson, and Heinrich Lammasch, a confidant of Emperor Karl as well as an internationally acclaimed pacifist, was arranged by the Austrian business magnate, Julius Meinl. As usual, the talks stumbled over the issue of a separate versus general peace, as well as Herron's insistence on a federal reorganization of the Monarchy, which he apparently believed Karl desired. In fact, Herron later published a fanciful account of the meeting and its aftermath, in which he claimed that Lammasch actually placed a decree calling for constitutional reform and renunciation of all annexations before the Emperor, but which Czernin and the Germans managed to scuttle at the last minute. In fact, with the Ukrainian treaty terms already approved and awaiting signature and with the memory of the January strikes still fresh, Karl would have needed little persuasion to pass on such a hasty and irrevocable course of action, had it actually existed.[38]

The most interesting part of the meeting, however, was that it took place without Czernin's knowledge. In fact, he only received word of it in mid-February from censor copies of thinly coded telegrams describing the meeting and its proposals. This raises a crucial issue. Karl and Czernin up to this point had been pursuing complementary courses designed to bring about general peace by pursuing contacts with the Entente while encouraging moderation in Berlin. By early February, with Czernin's policy set on obtaining peace in the East at any price, those paths were beginning to diverge, culminating in the open and dramatic split between the Emperor and his minister in April. Beginning with the Ukrainian treaty, Czernin drew Habsburg policy closer into alignment with the German alliance and the

[37] Revertera to Czernin, February 2, 1918, Politisches Archiv I, Carton 523, Liasse XLVII, *AT-OeStA/HHStA*

[38] See LAMMASCH-SPERL 1922.

victorious peace demanded by the generals, giving up on the Poles — and thus any efforts to appease nationalist demands — and on the Entente. His instructions to Habsburg agents in Switzerland to reject fresh advances from the British in late February indicate his determination to follow the German alliance to victory or death in 1918.

Karl, meanwhile, was still desperately grasping any options that might lead to peace. He resisted German demands for Austro-Hungarian participation in their upcoming offensive on the Western Front, emphasizing the Dual Monarchy's need for peace. Encouraged by a conciliatory speech by Wilson on February 11, the Emperor dispatched a personal note to the American President by way of King Alfonso of Spain advocating a peace without annexations and direct discussions between Austro-Hungarian and American representatives in order to bring about a "world peace conference" to end the war.[39] Wilson's reply, received on March 5, expressed dissatisfaction with Karl's vagueness relative to territorial and nationality questions but kept the channel open. In the meantime, Czernin had relented on his moratorium on discussions with the British upon learning that Lloyd George's private secretary, Philip Kerr, would be the British negotiator. However, he authorized the Habsburg representative, Wladyslaw Skrzyński, only to hear out British offers without comment and report their content to Vienna.[40] Thus, Kerr's vague suggestion in two meetings on March 15-16 of territorial compensation in exchange for practical and direct talks in the common interest of arranging a general peace went unanswered, and he returned to London on March 17. Czernin kept news of the termination of the talks from Karl and connived with Karl's secretary to prevent details of the exchange from reaching the Emperor.[41] Karl, for his part, dispatched a response to Wilson on March 22 that, due to the German offensive in France unleashed the previous day and the closing of the Franco-Swiss border, only reached Alfonso on March 31. It never made it to Washington. Essentially, with the German attack all potentially constructive contacts between the Monarchy and the Entente ceased.

The might have been here is fascinating. With Karl at least willing to authorize independent soundings for peace, might he also have been willing to detach the Monarchy's policies from those of his Foreign Minister and from the German alliance and pursue the separate peace urged by the Entente? Clearly, the Entente

[39] Text of Karl's Response to Wilson's Speech of February 12 [sic] with Forward Addressed to the King of Spain, Politisches Archiv I, Carton 964, Liasse Krieg 25, Friedensverhandlungen, *AT-OeStA/HHStA*

[40] Czernin to the Foreign Ministry (for Musulin), March 12, 1918, Politisches Archiv I, Carton 963, *AT-OeStA/HHStA*

[41] See the telegraphic exchange between Czernin and Demblin, March 9-19, 1918 in Politisches Archiv I, Carton 1087, Friedensdelegation Bukarest, Akten, *AT-OeStA/HHStA*

states were interested in this prospect as late as March, no doubt encouraged by the imminent German offensive on the Western Front. Might they have also been willing to back off their insistence on a separate peace with the Monarchy in favour of negotiating for a general peace? The growing rifts within each alliance were evident, with Karl distancing the Monarchy from the German militarists and the British and French backing away from their pledges to both Italy and Serbia. Barring a general peace, clearly by early 1918 a separate peace with the Entente offered the Dual Monarchy the best odds for survival after the war, though potentially at the cost of great suffering in the meantime. Whether that suffering — including the prospect of Germany turning vengefully on its former ally — would have been greater or less than that which actually transpired, or worth the price paid, remains conjectural.

What we can conclude is that while the Monarchy in early 1918 arguably had options still available in military matters, in peace initiatives, and even in potential constitutional reform, the pressing and immediate need for food ultimately dictated policies at the expense of all other considerations. The crisis simply could not be ignored, and a government that could not feed its people could no longer claim legitimacy. Nevertheless, the continued peace feelers from the Entente and Karl's sincere desire for peace indicate that the "Bread Peace" with the Ukraine need not have marked the limits of Habsburg policy. As late as mid-March, Karl could have thrown the Monarchy on the mercy of the Entente, renouncing German militarism — so evident at Brest-Litovsk — and even forgoing territorial gains as a gesture of goodwill. That was an option notably lacking for the Germans. It would have required breaking with Czernin, to be sure, but that break was looming anyway. Whether Habsburg armies would have defended the Dual Monarchy against its former ally, perhaps in alliance with Italian and Franco-British forces, remains an unanswerable question. Stranger things have happened, of course, in war as in peace.

What actually followed was more denouement after the drama of the first months of 1918. Czernin worked to discredit Lammasch, describing him as a "dangerous person," while dissuading Karl from any constitutional reforms or other measures that might weaken the structures of Dualism.[42] On April 2, he gave a speech at the Vienna city hall affirming Austria-Hungary's loyalty to the German alliance, attacking the Czech nationalists, and blaming French territorial aspirations for the collapse of peace talks and the unleashing of the German offensive in the West. French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau responded by publishing the complete text of Karl letter to Sixtus from 1917 recognizing the "just French claims" in Alsace-Lorraine. When Czernin demanded that Karl swear in writing that he

[42] Czernin to the Foreign Ministry, March 18, 1918, Politisches Archiv I, Carton 1084, Friedensdelegation Bukarest, Akten, *AT-OeStA/HHStA*

had never sent such a letter and remove himself from an active role in Austro-Hungarian government, the Emperor compelled his Foreign Minister's resignation on April 14. That same day Karl addressed a pathetic telegram to Wilhelm that read, "Mr. Clemenceau's accusations against me are so contemptible that I have determined to have no further contact with France. The only answer will be the firing of my guns in the West."[43] This was not, of course, enough for the German generals, who demanded and received Karl consent to a close post-war economic and military union with Germany. Karl signed the document at the German Supreme Headquarters at Spa, Belgium on May 12, marking his personal Canossa and the end of any lingering hopes for moderation from the Entente.

Where does all of this leave us? A bitter and discredited Czernin concluded in his memoirs, "We were bound to die. We were at liberty to choose the manner of our death, and we chose the most terrible." He further claimed that "a separate peace would have been no easier a form of death than that involved in holding out at the side of our allies."[44] While exploring the complex range of realities and options confronting the Habsburg government in early 1918 cannot change history, it can do something to refute such claims of inevitability. In the final analysis, the Habsburg government determined its own fate at least as much as it submitted to circumstances and forces beyond its control. The decisions made by Austro-Hungarian leaders confronting crises in sustainability and peace-making in early 1918 — as well as the options they left on the table — echoed well beyond the collapse that followed that autumn. They can thus inform both our understanding of events a century past and those of a present world still wrestling with the effects of the Great War.

[43] See KANN 1966.

[44] CZERNIN 1919: 33.

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Habsburški paradoks: odluka u Austro-Ugarskoj. Siječanj – ožujak 1918.

Stoljeće nakon raspada Austro-Ugarskog Carstva krajem Velikoga rata, konvencionalne povijesti taj raspad još uvijek uglavnom predstavljaju neizbježnim. Razlozi koji se navode uključuju ratnu podređenost Beča njemačkoj politici, uspon nacionalističkih pokreta unutar Monarhije koji su zahtijevali nezavisnost te općenito arhaična i korumpirana nesposobnost habsburške vlade. Iako je svaki od ovih razloga donekle valjan, zaključcima temeljenima samo na ovim činiteljima nedostaje neophodna perspektiva. Primjerice, neovisna narav ratnih austrougarskih političkih inicijativa – nerijetko u suprotnosti s onima njihovih njemačkih saveznika – dolazi do izražaja u svakom podrobnijem istraživanju. Slično tomu, kompleksnost i trajnost unutarnjih lojalnosti habsburškoj državi sugeriraju optimističniju procjenu održivosti Monarhije do vremena pred njezin konačni pad. Konačno, mirotvorne mogućnosti dostupne habsburškoj vladi prvih mjeseci 1918. bile su stvarne i raznolike, i nosile su potencijal za prevladavanje svih pogrešnih upravnih koraka i vojnih promašaja nakupljenih od 1914. godine. Drugim riječima, činjenica raspada dualne monarhije u jesen 1918. ne podrazumijeva neizbježnost takve sudbine u trenutku kada je Princip u ljeto 1914. ispalio sudbonosne hitce. U ovom radu istražuju se ključni problemi mirotvornih inicijativa i vojne te gospodarske održivosti u prvim mjesecima 1918. g., kada se može reći da presuda o održivosti dualne monarhije još nije bila donesena. Umjesto neizbježnog ishoda neodoljivih povijesnih snaga, pad habsburške države može se razumjeti i kao ishod odluka i prilika koje su čelnici Monarhije donijeli i odbacili između siječnja i ožujka 1918.

Zanemareno, a ključno gledište za ispitivanje pitanja održivosti i sklapanja mira upravo je institucija zadužena da njima upravlja, sama habsburška vlada. Uz nekoliko iznimaka, kreatori austrougarske politike vjerovali su u poželjnost i trajnu životnost multinacionalne države tijekom krize Prvog svjetskog rata. Njihove političke inicijative pokazale su duboku svijest o izazovima i izgledima koji su bili pred njima. Ovo je, naravno, suprotno od poslijeratnih procjena nacionalističkih povjesničara u zemljama nasljednicama, kao i onih u pobjedničkim silama Antante – nijedni ni drugi nisu se odlikovali objektivnošću i imali su ulog

u isticanju legitimnosti i neizbježnosti uništenja Dualne Monarhije. Ovakve interpretacije ignoriraju suštinsku i paradoksalnu činjenicu da su na početku 1918. g. izmučene, ali otporne habsburške vojske stajale sigurne – čak i pobjedničke – na svim frontama, i da su odluke o budućnosti dualne monarhije još fluktuirale i kod kuće i u inozemstvu. Doista, sile Antante predstavile su 1917. – 1918. više mogućnosti za uspješan habsburški bijeg iz rata, dok je izgled za njemačku pobjedu u Francuskoj, koji bi postigao isti cilj, postojao kao mogućnost do ljeta 1918. Uz toliki fokus na Njemačku za vrijeme i nakon rata, i toliku potrebu da se opravdaju i rat i mirovni ugovori, neovisnost austrougarskog odlučivanja jednostavno se izgubila u prijevodu.

Zastupam mišljenje da je habsburška vojska, nužni sastojak za trajnu životnost dualne monarhije, ostala suštinski netaknuta kroz tri ključna prva mjeseca 1918. g. i dijelom i nakon toga sve do posljednjih dana rata. Slično tome, ozbiljne mirovne inicijative usredotočene na sve četiri velike sile Antante – Britaniju, Francusku, Italiju i Sjedinjene Države – nastavile su aktivno cirkulirati sve do početka njemačke ofenzive na Francusku 21. ožujka 1918.

Jedino područje koje je zaplitalo vojne i mirovne opcije i vodilo habsburške odluke u prvim mjesecima 1918. bila je opskrba. Budući da se austrijska sfera dualne monarhije suočavala s glađu i posljedičnom unutarnjom neslogom, Beč je svoje postupke temeljio na kratkoročnim smicalicama koje su obećavale – više iluzorno nego stvarno – kruh i neku vrstu mira. Zapravo, odluke donesene u Brest-Litovsku i u Beču od siječnja do ožujka 1918. osujetile su druge političke opcije koje su još bile mogle završiti opstankom Austro-Ugarskog Carstva. Stoga, ni neizbježne povijesne sile, ni irelevantnost habsburške vlade, nisu diktirale kolaps koji je uslijedio najesen. Naprotiv, disolucija je proizašla iz privremene panike koja je vodila razumljive, ali kratkovidne odluke nakon kojih nije bilo povratka. Oni koji su se nadali sačuvati Austro-Ugarsko Carstvo na koncu su ga pomogli uništiti.

Ključne riječi: Dvojna Monarhija, mirotvorstvo, austrougarska vojska, Ottokar Czernin, car Karlo.

Keywords: Dual Monarchy, peacemaking, Austro-Hungarian Military, Ottokar Czernin, Emperor Charles.

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