Hungary in World War I: The End of Historic Hungary

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Austria-Hungary's declaration of war on Serbia on July 28, 1914, was received with unbounded enthusiasm by street crowds in Budapest. During those heady days the people welcoming war on Pest's Oktogon Square, or on Buda's St. György Square, had no idea that instead of the expected short and glorious conflict, it would be a war that would last for four years and would threaten the very existence of Hungary. Within three days the local conflict between neighbours evolved into a world war, a development which was received by the crowds with similar enthusiasm in all belligerent capitals.

The pretext for Austria-Hungary's decision to start a war against Serbia was the latter's subversive activities culminating in the assassination of the Habsburg heir, Archduke Francis Ferdinand, and his wife. The archduke was no friend of the Hungarian establishment, as he considered the Hungarians as having too much influence within the Empire, and to change the status quo, he wanted to turn the dualistic system into a trialistic one by giving the Czechs, Poles, or South Slavs equal power to that of the Hungarians and the Austrians. The last of these choices would have altered not only the Empire, but historic Hungary as well.

The real reason for the war, however, was Austria-Hungary's concern with the territorial growth of Serbia, which since 1908 had doubled its imperium. The South Slav state, with its irredentist Greater Serbian vision, threatened with further expansion, this time at the expense of Austria and Hungary. The Austro-Hungarian leaders saw the international revulsion to Francis Ferdinand's assassination as the opportune moment to start an assumedly quick and victorious war to end the Serbian
threat by reducing Serbia’s territory and making it a puppet state. They also assumed that if they missed this opportunity in the summer of 1914, in the future the international military constellation would be less advantageous for the Monarchy to fight a war against Serbia as other powers were more likely to come to that country’s aid.⁴

Accordingly, at the meeting of the common Cabinet Council on July 7, 1914, in Vienna, the crucial decision for war was agreed upon, though the Hungarian Prime Minister, István Tisza, objected. It was not that he opposed the elimination of the Serbian threat, since it was he who had proposed to the Council the dismemberment of Serbia in the first place. He was against the annexation of any Serb territory to the Monarchy. He was also concerned that a war against Serbia had not been diplomatically prepared and therefore would not attract adequate international support. He was also worried about Russia, which had acted as a protector for Serbia in the past, and Romania, which he saw as a potential enemy if the war could not be localized. For these reasons, he proposed a harsh diplomatic démarche to Serbia, but the kind it could accept. He also believed that since some causus belli could always be found, the war should be postponed to a more propitious time, when Russia would be preoccupied with Asian expansion. The Cabinet, whose bellicose stance was abetted by German Emperor William II, disregarded Tisza’s admonitions about Russia, and dismissed its possible involvement in the war. It was reasoned that in case it did enter, it was to the Monarchy’s advantage, as Russia was deemed to become a greater threat in the future.⁵ As a compromise, therefore, the Cabinet agreed to the sending of the type of demands to Belgrade that the Serb government would most likely deem unacceptable, thus justifying the use of force, but not angering Russia in the process. Tisza accepted this approach though he insisted on approving the ultimatum before it was sent in order to ensure that it did not make the goal of its framers too obvious.⁶

Tisza’s opposition to the use of force changed only on July 10, after he received information from Foreign Minister Count Leopold Berchtold that William II, who was pressing the Monarchy for a “blitzkrieg,” had made strong representations to King Carol of Romania to stay out of the coming conflict. This put Tisza’s mind at ease about a possible Romanian attack on Transylvania.⁷ On July 14, when he returned to the imperial capital, he went on to support the military solution to the Serbian crisis.⁸ At the Cabinet Council meeting of July 19, 1914, when the ultimatum to Serbia was approved, Tisza also suppressed his fears about
Russia, stating that Russia would possibly stay out of the war if Austria-Hungary expressed its intention not to annex Serb territory. To appease Tisza, the Council approved the "no annexation" policy, which also intended to allay Tisza's fear of more Slavs being added to the Monarchy, thereby shifting the Empire's demographic balance in favour of the Slavs at the expense of the Hungarians.

This concession to Tisza's sensitivities was soon altered. Although before the war spread, Count Berchtold had instructed his ambassador to St. Petersburg to declare that "so long as the war between Austria-Hungary and Serbia remains localized, the Monarchy does not aim in any way at territorial acquisitions of any sort," after Russia entered the war, planners at the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Ministry began to think about territorial gains at the expense of Russian Poland. The inclusion of additional millions of Slavs in the Empire would have probably led to the introduction of some kind of "trialist" solution for the Dual Monarchy which would have ended the existing Austrian-Magyar joint hegemony. It is clear, therefore, that in order to solve the "Serb crisis" of the summer of 1914 and to maintain Magyar influence in the Empire and supremacy in the Kingdom of Hungary, Tisza, instead of calling for the dismemberment of Serbia, should have proposed territorial concessions to Serbia. In particular, he should have offered to transfer some of the South Slav inhabited areas of Hungary to Serb sovereignty. Yet in royal Hungary no statesman, politician, or scholar was willing to think of territorial concessions as a way of preserving the Habsburg Monarchy and, in fact, the Hungarian Kingdom. Instead of making such concessions, war was chosen, which led to the Monarchy's destruction and Hungary's dismemberment. Rather than offering to transfer land inhabited by Serbs to Serbia, by October 1915 the Hungarian government presented its view to the common Cabinet Council demanding "parity": If Austria wanted to annex parts of Russian Poland, Hungary would demand Bosnia-Herzegovina and Dalmatia.

The Austro-Hungarian ultimatum to Serbia was transmitted to Belgrade on July 23, 1914, and in spite of the harshness of the ultimatum, the Serb reply was conciliatory though evasive. It could have served as basis for negotiations. The Austro-Hungarian demand for the right of its officials to seek out the culprits in Belgrade was rejected on the ground that it was a violation of the principle of sovereignty. This rejection provided Vienna with the excuse to break diplomatic relations with Serbia. Next, mobilization orders followed and war was declared.
Miscalculations and Disasters

For the Monarchy, the war started disastrously. On July 29, the chief of the General Staff, Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, in accordance with his country’s war plans, ordered the troops to be transported on trains south, to the Serbian front, even though it was likely that a major attack would come from Russia in the north. On July 31, in response to Russian mobilization, Conrad ordered the rerouting of some of those troops to the north, in anticipation of a two-front war. He was told by the military’s railway authorities, however, that the preset time-tables did not permit this, and such an action would abort the war plans against Serbia. Thus troops destined to be shipped to the Russian front first had to reach their debarkation points in the south before they could re-embark to be sent back north to Galicia. All in all about 180 trains were unnecessarily sent south. The consequence of this blunder was that many of the troops did not arrive in time to the Carpathians and Galicia to stem the Russian offensive that came at the end of August. Some of the divisions did not reach the northern front until January and February 1915.16

These developments clearly indicated the fallacy of the concept of the "short war" which was in part based on the smoothly functioning rail transportation of troops to the front to bring about quick and decisive victories. Instead of attaining success, the Austro-Hungarian forces had to abandon the Bukovinian capital Czernowitz (Chernovtsy) on August 31; Lemberg (L’viv), the key city of Galicia, fell on September 3; Przemyśl came under siege on August 13, and Jaroslav was evacuated on the 21st. The retreat was stopped only at the Tarnow-Gorlice line, 230 kilometres west of Lemberg, putting eastern and central Galicia under Russian occupation. These initial battles of the war proved to be the bloodiest, with casualties of 350,000 in the opening phase of the conflict. From October to December, an additional 800,000 were wounded, killed, went missing, or were captured.17

The Austro-Hungarian defeat on one front was accompanied by the failure of the punitive war against Serbia on the other front. The casualty rate in the south approached 300,000.18 The Dual Monarchy was never able to recover from this great blood-letting.19 In 1916, the year of the famous Russian Brusilov offensive, there was another surge of huge losses amounting to 1,061,091 troops.20 During the course of the war the Dual Monarchy mobilized 9 million men between the ages of eighteen
and fifty-three. Of the 9 million, 3.4 million came from Hungary and Croatia. Of the men in Austro-Hungarian uniform 1.1 million died, 3.6 million were wounded, and 2 million became prisoners of war. 530,000 of the dead, 1.4 million of the wounded, and 833,000 of the POWs, were Hungarian. 21

The Habsburg armed forces, which besides the common Austro-Hungarian Army included the Austrian Landwehr and the Hungarian Honvéd, were not adequately trained and lacked sufficient firepower. In terms of manpower, Austria-Hungary was behind the other great power belligerents. Because of the lack of funds, only about thirty percent of its manpower pool was drafted, and many recruits were given only two months of training. 22 The Dual Monarchy had forty-eight infantry divisions, while Russia had ninety-three, France eighty-eight, and little Serbia eleven. The Empire’s field artillery, in the process of replacement, was mostly obsolete. In the Habsburg armies, only forty-two pieces supported an infantry battalion as opposed to forty-eight pieces for a Russian battalion, and fifty-four for a German one. As a German military specialist noted, the Habsburg army was “adequate for a campaign against Serbia, but inadequate for a major European war.” 23 If the Austro-Hungarian leaders had started the war to prevent their enemies from overtaking them as a military power, the war in 1914 indicated that it was already too late to use force to reestablish the equilibrium. For Austria-Hungary the expectation of victory was as much an illusion as was the hope of a short war — based as it was on the cult of the offensive, the notion which was shared by all belligerents. 24

For Prime Minister Tisza, who mistook the initial enthusiasm of his countrymen for the war as a sign of approval of his leadership, there existed an additional illusion. He came to believe that the war, when it came, could and would lead to national reconciliation and the advent of unity among Hungary’s nationalities. Yet there was no favourable response coming on this matter even from the county and government officials, 25 much less from the nationalities who saw the war as an opportunity to press their demands for additional minority rights. At the outbreak of the war, in order to win over the nationalities, Tisza’s government made a number of concessions. It issued an amnesty to political prisoners. It ordered public schools to teach non-Hungarians not only in Hungarian but also in their mother tongue. It permitted the displaying of national colours along with the Hungarian ones, as long as these were not the same as the enemy’s. Tisza also offered the leaders of the Romanian
minority educational reforms, concessions on language use, and the formation of electoral districts favouring the Romanian population, but these offers were not received as going far enough. The ethnic Romanians in Transylvania began to look toward the Romanian kingdom for military liberation. The appeasement of Romania and the Romanian irredenta in Hungary would have required some territorial concessions, but Prime Minister Tisza refused to concede any territory. In 1915, when the fence-sitter Italy could have been brought to the Central Powers' side with territorial concessions by Austria, Tisza refused to support such a deal, fearing that it would lead to demands that Hungary make similar concessions to Romania in Transylvania. Even following the entry of Italy on the side of the Entente in May 1915, Tisza refused to contemplate even some limited territorial concessions to Romania as a price for her continued neutrality. The territory that could have been sacrificed at the time was minuscule in size when compared to the Hungarian lands Romania gained by siding with the eventual victors of the war.

In the second half of 1915, the Romanian ethnic press in Hungary (i.e. in Transylvania) became vigorously persecuted. In the summer of 1916, Romania attacked Hungary and briefly invaded Transylvania. The sympathetic reception of enemy troops by the indigenous Romanian population led to the hardening of Hungarian attitudes. Consequently, two to three thousand pro-Regat intellectuals were interned in the western Hungarian city of Sopron. Soon thereafter eighty thousand Transylvanian Romanians fled their homes — when the Romanian army retreated from Transylvania — and sought refuge in the Kingdom of Romania. In 1917, Minister of Education Albert Apponyi had the Romanian teachers' colleges closed, indicating a return to a policy of forced assimilation. Other nationalities, the Ukrainians and the Serbs, also suffered because of the fighting. Because they lived in the war zone, they were often mistreated by the military on the suspicion of being spies for the enemy.

The Entente Powers' appeal in 1917–1918 to the Dual Monarchy's national minorities to undermine the Austro-Hungarian war effort also contributed to the Budapest authorities' viewing Hungary's non-Magyar populations as a potential fifth-column. A government edict issued at the end of 1917 reflected this attitude. According to the new rule, estates could not be sold (or even leased for more than ten years) without government approval. If the government did not approve of the buyer, it had the right to select another. Ostensibly, the policy aimed at
assuring that land could be acquired by war veterans or their widows, but in reality it aimed to prevent the acquisition of land by members of Hungary’s national minorities. The government’s inability to handle the nationalities question under the stress of war acted as a catalyst and contributed to the secession of the minorities from Hungary when the Dual Monarchy collapsed in October 1918.

Another of Tisza’s illusions was his belief that the war could bring about the enhancement of Hungary’s influence within the Monarchy, which would lead to full parity with Austria. In fact during the war efforts to enhance Hungary’s power within the Dual Monarchy led to increasing tensions and a weakening of dualistic cohesion, which before the war had served as the best guarantee of the Hungarian state’s survival.

The War's Impact on Hungary

The war’s outbreak seemed to bring radical changes to Hungarian politics. In the long turbulent Hungarian Parliament there were signs of a budding truce among the major political parties, particularly between István Tisza’s governing Party of Work and the opposition Independents. The Social Democratic Party, the only mass party in Hungary, and which had no parliamentary representation, also supported the war out of patriotic duty, just as its sister parties in France and Germany did. Nationalism thus carried the day over working-class internationalism. As a result of the nationalist war fever in Hungary, for the first time since his coronation in 1867, the Habsburg monarch Francis Joseph came to be recognized as a truly Hungarian king among the Hungarian populace. At the time of his death in 1916, conservative and liberal writers alike eulogized him as such. The liberal writer Hugó Ignótus remarked: “It is no exaggeration to state that Hungary has not had a national king like Francis Joseph since King Matthias.”

The bubble of the “short war” illusion burst in December 1914, the date which, according to the pre-war military planners, was to mark the war’s end, as it was assumed that the huge national armies of the belligerents would run out of logistical supplies. This problem was overcome and the war effort continued through the mobilization of the civilian population for the production of military supplies. Industrial and agricultural production began to be coordinated by the state. This practice later became known as total war, though at the time it was called “war
socialism,” as the practice undermined the prevailing economic model of *laissez faire* capitalism and increasingly resembled the command economy model favoured by the socialists. The degree of mobilization and regimentation of the civilian population for the war effort was unparalleled in modern times. The practice gave birth to the “home front,” which not only denoted the application of authoritarian measures to civilians, but also connoted the need to create the kind of social cohesion that existed among the soldiers in the trenches. Governments employed social, political, and economic measures and propaganda to that end. In Hungary the establishment of a home front brought about radical changes that prepared the ground for the political, economic, and social programs that were introduced by the revolution that started on October 31, 1918.

The increased power of the state in wartime Hungary had its legal underpinning in the emergency law, the War Services Act, which had been drafted in 1912 during the Balkan crisis. According to this law, in the event of war, emergency power was to remain in the hands of the civilian government; even military requisitions were to be implemented by civilian authorities. The Hungarian home front therefore tended to resemble more that of Great Britain than those prevailing in Germany or Austria where the war led to the ascendance of the military over the civilian administration.

The first major intervention in Hungary’s *laissez faire* economy came on August 1, 1914, three days after the declaration of war on Serbia. It was a fourteen-day moratorium on loans and debts. It was intended to prevent a run on the banks by worried depositors. The life of the moratorium was extended in one form or another for a year. Later the government, using the War Services Act, placed all defense-related industries under military discipline by drafting workers under fifty into militia labour battalions, which were then placed in designated factories. Other government edicts also drafted some women, and men over fifty, but they were not put under martial law. The war economy placed more and more workers in areas defined as war-related. By October 1, 1915, in addition to the mines, rail yards, flour mills, and food processing companies, 263 firms were put under military justice. A year later their number increased to 615, and by the end of the war to 900. It is estimated that by war’s end between 500,000 and 800,000 thousand workers were engaged in war-related production. In addition to these workers, 140,000 troops were also employed in factories.
The flow of production was assured by centralized, government-controlled monopolies. In mid-1915 the War Produce Corporation was set up. Financed by state and bank investments, the firm had a monopoly on the acquisition and sale of grain. Other monopolies that were established included the so-called centres for metals, textiles, sugar, and others. By the end of the war there were 291 such centres. A number of committees made up of government officials and trade specialists were also involved in the coordination of production and distribution. The control over distribution aimed to fill the needs of the war front first. This meant that food items and consumer goods for the home front were restricted and price controls were introduced on food stuffs. Food rationing was introduced in the spring of 1915 and in January 1916 ration cards made their debut. As the war progressed and food shortages increased, the authorities reduced the rations.

Another consequence of the war on the home front was the increase of female and adolescent labour. Women entered the labour market not because of the manpower draft, but as a consequence of economic necessity caused by the absence of the traditional male wage earner. While there are no statistics available for the women employed in the consumer-product and service industries, but in the manufacturing sector — where women were hired in large numbers during the war — statistics are telling enough of the increase. In December 1914, 137,075 women were employed in this sector; by May 1916, their number had reached 209,833. Since the wages of female workers were traditionally lower, their increased employment led to the decline of wages paid to men, though never to the level of women wage earners. In fact during the war only teamsters earned less than women. Female labour also increased in agriculture. Agrarian labour laws issued at the beginning of the war granted financial support to the soldiers’ dependents, but not to their able-bodied family members. This law forced not only women, but also adolescent children and the elderly to perform agricultural labour. In spite of this involuntary mobilization of villagers, labour shortages persisted. There was an attempt to solve the problem by giving leaves at planting and harvest time to peasant soldiers who were performing non-frontline duties. Military labour battalions and some 300,000 Russian and Serb POWs were also assigned to agricultural work. A command economy geared to fighting the war led to serious shortages in consumer products. A price freeze failed to slow down the
inflation caused by the shortages. The slow rise of inflation during the first eighteen months of the war gave way to galloping inflation, as there was an attempt to finance the war by printing more money. Between 1914 and 1917 the cost of household goods increased by 268.17 percent and that of clothing by 1,230.32 percent. It is estimated that 63–80 percent of the labourers' wages had to be spent on food, leaving very little money for clothing and shelter. The consequent decline in the standard of living was reflected in a poll taken in Budapest in May 1918. This revealed that the 682,548 respondents (out of a population of 962,435) owned 800,000 pairs of shoes. About 291,000 owned one pair, 241,000 two pairs, and only 150,000 owned three pairs. Those who owned three pairs, however, indicated that their shoes were repaired or were beyond repair.

Economic hardships led to wildcat strikes by 1916. The government responded to the unrest by setting up grievance committees, which were to arbitrate between workers and their employers. Most of the decisions favoured the workers, indicating the seriousness of the plight of the workers as well as the government's concern about the decline of morale on the home front. Since the workers were represented before the grievance committees by the unions, their importance and membership also increased. From December 1916 to December 1917 membership in unions rose from 55,588 to 212,222.

Another circumstance that contributed to low morale on the home front was the shortage of coal. Output declined because of the labour shortage in the mines and the scarcity of rolling stock. By 1917 this situation had resulted in industrial slowdowns, and in some factories, in a complete halt to production. Responding to the problem, the government prohibited the temporary lay-off of workers from these factories and on the initiative of the Ministry of National Defense, offered "coal aid" to those workers who were idled by the coal shortage. This unemployment benefit amounted to seventy-five percent of the worker's wage, half being paid by the treasury and half by the employer. For the first time in Hungarian history, the state rather than private insurance companies paid unemployment benefits. The war, therefore, was responsible for the dawn of the welfare state in Hungary. The diminution of laissez faire economics was also demonstrated by the introduction of rent controls, and rent moratorium for the dependents of the conscripted soldier.

The war also forced the lawmakers and some churchmen to pay attention to the plight of the peasants, who constituted 62.22 percent of
Hungary's population of twenty-one million. In 1916 there were discussions in the country and even in Parliament about land reforms, including the distribution of homesteads by the state to soldiers who were smallholders, sharecroppers, or agricultural labourers in civilian life. While the war brought about a sixty percent increase in the agricultural labourer's wage, inflation more than wiped out this gain. In 1916 a day labourer earned 1,050 kronen for three hundred days' work. In contrast to this figure, the annual cost to the treasury of feeding and housing a POW was estimated at 1,333.9 kronen.

Moderately well-off and well-to-do peasants were also experiencing hardship because of the war, as there were price-ceilings established for agrarian products, while much of the industrial goods needed by the peasantry were selling at inflated prices. The peasants responded by withholding produce and hoarding it for the black market. In some cases there was a reduction of output. The government responded with military raids of the granaries, which did not bring about a resolution of the problem. In spite of the hardship experienced, the peasants, unlike the workers, did not respond with strikes. Since agrarian unrest was minimal and land reforms were not seen as leading to increased production, the government failed to take up the cause of land reform.

The difficulties of agriculture were not the consequence of patterns of ownership but were due to weather conditions and to the impact of the war, which created shortages of draft animals and farm machinery. The cutoff of Romanian grain imports in 1916, which had supplied 30 percent of the Dual Monarchy's needs, further exacerbated the situation. By 1918, the wheat harvest had declined by 37 percent, rye by 32 percent, barley by 57 percent, potatoes by 40 percent, and sugar beets by 54 percent. The shortages contributed to the decline of the morale of the home front and hunger riots erupted in 1917 in various parts of the country. The decline of food production led to a reduction of supplies sent to Austria, where the situation was truly critical. Consequently, the Austrian newspapers, seeking scapegoats, accused the Hungarians of bad faith and setting up a "Hungarian blockade." The Hungarian press responded in kind, accusing the Austrians of siphoning off much needed food provisions, and called on the government not to comply with Vienna's requests for produce. The quarrels over food supplies contributed to the drifting apart of the two halves of the Monarchy.
The government tried to counteract the sagging of national morale by reviving discussion on electoral reforms. The re-surfacing of the suffrage question, however, only caused the collapse of the parliamentary truce. The renewal of acrimony over the issue of suffrage was in part due to the fact that in Hungary, alone among the belligerents, a national government — a wartime "grand coalition" of all or most parties — never materialized. On June 21, 1915, the five-year term of Parliament expired, but elections were postponed to six months after the signing of a peace treaty. At the same time, however, Parliament was not prorogued: rather, it was to sit and debate the nation’s affairs as usual until the end of the war.

In the spring of 1915, the opposition parties reopened the debate on suffrage on a patriotic note, calling for voting rights for front-line soldiers over twenty. Soon after, Count Mihály Károlyi, a leader of the Independents, renewed his call for universal manhood suffrage. Debates continued into 1917, when war weariness, shortages, and labour unrest, coupled with the news of the Russian Revolution, forced the lawmakers to resolve the parliamentary deadlock on the issue. On July 19, 1918, a compromise law broadened the right to vote from 7.7 percent of the population to 13 percent. The modest reform failed to satisfy either the opposition parties in Parliament or the Social Democratic Party outside of it, but for the first time the government conceded the right to all political parties, including the Socialists, to organize without restraints.

Parliamentary peace was again broken by Count Mihály Károlyi when on July 17, 1916, he caused the Independence Party to split over the question of fighting the war on the side of Germany. A new party came into existence, called the Károlyi Independence Party. It demanded an independent Hungary linked to Austria only through a personal union, a disengagement from the German alliance, and an end to the war with a separate peace that did not compromise Hungary’s integrity.

The Russian revolutions of 1917 not only influenced Hungarian parliamentary politics but they also had an important impact on Hungarian POWs in Russia. It is estimated that of the 1,600,000 to 2,110,000 troops of the Austro-Hungarian army in captivity, 500,000 to 600,000 were Hungarians. Of the 300,000 who died in the Russian camps a large proportion was also Hungarian. The tsarist Russian government divided the captives into camps according to their nationality. Slav, Italian, and Romanian POWs were sent to camps in European Russia, while German, German-speaking Austrian, and Magyar-speaking Hungarian POWs were
sent to the more inhospitable areas of the Russian Empire: to the Urals, the White Sea area, Siberia, or to Russian Central Asia. Most of the 300,000 Austro-Hungarian POWs who died in Russian captivity were from camps in these regions. Some observers noted that conditions to which the Hungarian captives were subjected were among the worst of that time. Because of their ill treatment, which continued during the administration of the revolutionary Provisional Government of Alexander Kerensky, many of the prisoners became attracted to socialist ideas, and later fell prey to Bolshevik agitation. This was especially true of those who were already acquainted with social democratic ideology before they donned the uniform of their country. The Bolsheviks called for the humane treatment of the POWs, as their leader, Vladimir Ilich Lenin, expected these soldiers to carry the bacilli of Bolshevism back to Eastern and Central Europe at war’s end.68

Following the Bolshevik Revolution of November 7, 1917, which led to the withdrawal of Russia from the war, Russia’s new rulers improved POW camp conditions. About 100,000 Hungarians joined the Red Guards — and soon after, the Red Army in the Russian Civil War — in order to escape life in the camps and to make their way home. In May 1918, the Hungarian Red Guards in Cheliabinsk clashed with the entrained Czechoslovak Legion troops, erstwhile POWs, who were destined to fight for the Entente on the western front and whom the Hungarians wanted to disarm. Thus the nationalities conflicts of the Dual Monarchy spilled into Siberia. The civil war among the Habsburg nationalities helped to touch off the Civil War in Russia.69 Consequently the Czechoslovaks remained in Russia and joined the Russian anti-Bolsheviks in a vain attempt to set up a government that would bring back the eastern front against the Central Powers. Though defeated in Russia, the Czechoslovak Legion’s activities there contributed in a major way to the Entente’s decision to support the creation of a Czechoslovak state,70 which required the territorial dismantling of both Austria and Hungary. If the cause of the war related to the preservation of the integrity of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, it is significant to note that its own drafted men, the Czechs and Slovaks, contributed to its demise.

The leading Hungarian POW champions of the Bolshevik cause, foremost among them Béla Kun, joined the Russian Communist Party and on November 4, 1918, a day after the Padua Armistice had been signed, they formed the Hungarian Communist Party in Russia.71 These leaders were then transported to Hungary in order to foment a communist type
revolution there. They were able to profit from the chaos that followed defeat and managed to come to power for a brief period on March 21, 1919. Thus the war represented another turning point for Hungary through the agency of the former POWs who brought Soviet power to East Central Europe. Because the Soviet government of Béla Kun was defeated as a result of foreign intervention, the episode also had long range impact. The Hungarian communists, who grabbed power again in 1948 and relinquished it only in 1989, attempted to legitimize their rule by harking back to the first Commune.

Because roughly seventy percent of the Soviet Republic’s top officials were of Jewish origin, the brief communist interlude provided the counter-revolutionaries with a pretext for a vigorous anti-Semitic campaign. This would leave its imprint on the interwar years, even though most of Hungary’s Jews had not favoured communism either during the war or during its aftermath. In fact, when the war had broken out in 1914, Hungary’s Jewish population supported the war with enthusiasm, seeing in it the coming defeat of the official anti-Semitism of tsarist Russia. The Hungarian Jews exemplified the role that Tisza hoped the country’s nationalities would assume by rallying around the Hungarian tricolour. Not surprisingly, the Jewish population in turn expected that the war would accelerate their march to complete acceptance. The popular plays written in response to the war seemed to reflect this perspective. Jews, in contrast to their prejudiced portrayals before the war, were depicted as being as patriotic as the country’s Magyar citizenry. In one play a Jewish banker’s son joins the hussars and eventually becomes a lieutenant. In another, the Jewish grocery-store owner, by volunteering for military service, becomes accepted by Gentile gentlemen as their equal. In real life not only grocers but, as noted by István Deák:

Jewish writers and journalists did signal service as war propagandists, and thousands of Jewish reserve officers willingly assumed command of their troops. Never again would Jews be allowed to play such a dignified role in the history of German-Austrians, Magyars, and Slavs. Thereafter their role would be increasingly that of victims.

This victimization began during the war as the deprivations and hardship led to the increase of anti-Semitism proving that for the Jews of Hungary the war also brought about an unexpected turning point in their lives.
A recognition of the problem of victimization was evidenced in May 1917, by the radical journal *Huszadik Század* under the editorship of the sociologist Oszkár Jáspi. It distributed a questionnaire among sixty Jewish and non-Jewish intellectuals who were interested in the “Jewish Question.” Their reply was published in the same year. On August 7, 1918, in his parliamentary speech, the ex-prime minister István Tisza, assailed in the strongest terms the spread of anti-Semitism and the insinuation that Jews were war profiteers. Rather, he hailed the bravery of the Jewish officers at the front. His admonitions, however, were not sufficient to put the Genie back into the bottle. The impending defeat made scapegoating a sign of the times.

**Defeat and its Consequences**

On September 29, 1918, an exhausted Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey agreed to appeal to Washington to initiate armistice negotiations on the basis of President Wilson’s Fourteen Points. To save his crumbling realm, the Emperor Charles issued a manifesto on October 16, proclaiming the federalization of Austria. This declaration was tantamount to an admission of defeat. The following day Tisza admitted in Parliament: “We have lost the war.” The Italian front, which had been barely holding up since the last and unsuccessful Habsburg offensive on the Piave in June 1918, cracked in the wake of these admissions. The near collapse of authority at the top created a power vacuum that was soon filled by forces that only recently favoured change without revolution. The rise of a revolutionary government in Hungary on October 31, 1918, only three days before the Armistice of Padua, indicated that the military representatives on the Italian front signed a cease fire agreement in the name of the Dual Monarchy that had already ceased to exist.

The armistice, *de facto* if not *de jure*, brought the war to its end. With the Empire falling apart into its national components, there was no chance for its return to the battlefield upon being offered unacceptable peace terms. The war brought about radical changes that fashioned the prewar years into the bygone years that could never be recaptured — “the years of peace.” The introduction of total war mobilized Hungary’s civilian population who therefore saw more reason to share a voice in national decision-making through the ballot box. It also led to étatist solutions of the economy, undermining the liberal principles of *laissez*
faire. With Hungary fighting nation-states, such as the Kingdom of the Serbs and Kingdom of the Romanians, the co-nationals of these peoples living in the Monarchy came to see themselves as irredenta — the unredeemed ones — whose future belonged with the “enemy.” The dismantling of the Hungarian kingdom therefore became corollary to the solution of the nationality problem.

The privations caused by the war created social conflicts among the peasantry and the workers, making them more willing to resort to illegal measures, such as riots and strikes. These actions prepared public opinion to accept a revolution that on November 16, 1918, dethroned the Habsburgs and promulgated for the first time a republican government in Hungary. The stress of war also caused the resurfacing of widespread anti-Semitism, and the sufferings of Hungarian prisoners of war in Russia led to the introduction to the Hungarian experience of the virulent form of Marxism: Leninist communism.

For Hungary the war was supposed to preserve the status quo. Instead, it led to a great many hardships during the war and social strife, foreign occupation, and civil war after its conclusion. In particular, Hungary's defeat led to the harshest of the peace treaties that were signed in the environs of Paris, the dictated Peace Treaty of Trianon. From the terms and spirit of this treaty, Hungarian society has yet to recover.

NOTES

I wish to thank Professor Gábor Vermes for his comments on the first draft of this essay.


3 Gábor Vermes, István Tisza, The Liberal Vision and Conservative Statecraft of a Magyar Nationalist (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1985),


Ibid., 17–21.

6 Ibid., 21.


10 *The Austro-Hungarian Red Book*: Count Gyula Andrássy, the last foreign minister of the Dual Monarchy claimed that the “no annexation” pledge aimed to avoid a world war. See Gyula Andrássy, *Diplomácia és világháború* [Diplomacy and World War] (Budapest: Gönczöl-Primusz, 1990), 43.


15 *The Austro-Hungarian Red Book*.


18 Galántai, Hungary in the First World War, 93.


21 Ibid., 104; Deák, Beyond Nationalism, 192–193.


25 Vermes, Tisza István, 244–45.


29 Tibor Hajdu, Az 1918-as magyarországi demokratikus forradalom [The 1918 Democratic Revolution in Hungary] (Budapest: Kossuth, 1968), 13; Mark Cornwall, “The Dissolution of Austria Hungary,” in The Last Years of Austria-Hungary, ed. Cornwall, 134. A recent Hungarian publication claims that the Transyslvanian Romanians demonstrated no enthusiasm toward the victorious Romanian occupiers. See István Eördögh, Erdély román megszállása (1916–1920) [The Romanian Occupation of Transylvania] (Szeged: Lazi, 2000), 15. This assessment disregards certain evidence and is politically motivated. Its aim is to
prove that the nationalities in Hungary were satisfied and the official dismemberment of Hungary at the Trianon Palace in 1920 as part of the Versailles peace settlement, was the work of the victorious Entente powers. Therefore with the demise of the two creations of the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 (greater Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia) today's Hungarian revisionist could call for border changes by stressing that in multinational Hungary the nationalities were satisfied and, as a result, the breaking-up Hungary was unjustified. It may be significant to note that István Eördögh's publication was financed by the Hungarian Ministry of Education and by Hungary's Twentieth Century Institute, which is also financed by government monies. In István Diószegi et al.'s Twentieth Century World History, the claim is made that "in multinational and multireligious Hungary toleration was dominant," and that in the Dual Monarchy fifty million people were part of a "common market." The authors thus ingeniously insinuate that the fate of the Monarchy was not dependent on the peoples of the empire, but on the victorious Great Powers of World War I. See István Diószegi et al., A 20. Század egyetemes története [The World History of the 20th century] (Budapest: Korona, 1995), 61.


32 Zsuppán, "The Hungarian Political Scene," in The Last Years of Austria-Hungary, 71.

33 Dezső Pap, A magyar szociálpolitika a világháborúban [Hungarian social policies in the World War] (Budapest: Grill, 1934), 233–34.

34 Cornwall, "The Dissolution of Austria-Hungary," in The Last Years of Austria-Hungary 140.


37 Matthias Corvinus or Matthias Hunyadi (r. 1458–1490), under whose reign the Kingdom of Hungary experienced its last age of greatness and national independence. The quotation is from Ivan Sanders, "Hungarian Writers and Literature in World War I," in East Central European Society in World War I, ed. Béla K. Király and Nándor Dreisziger (New York: Social Science Monographs, 1985), 147; for an overview of the impact of war on writers, see Joseph

38 Peter Pastor, “The Home Front in Hungary, 1914–18,” in East Central European Society in World War I, 124; according to François Furet, the term total war was first used by Ernst Jünger in 1930. See François Furet, The Passing of an Illusion. The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), 506, n. 28.


41 Ibid., 201–02.


46 Nevelő, A háború, 187; Pap, A magyar szociálpolitika, 129.


Nevelő, *A háború*, 160; Wargelin, 278.


69 Pastor, “Hungarian POWs in Russia during the Revolution and Civil War,” 155.
73 Deák, Beyond Nationalism, 195.
74 Szabó, “Magyarország nem volt, hanem lesz,” 191.
75 Deák, Beyond Nationalism, 195.
77 Vermes, István Tisza, 430.