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**THE COLLAPSE OF THE AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN MONARCHY
THE FUNDAMENTAL ROLE OF THE GEOPOLITICAL TRANSITION
AND PERCEPTION**

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Abstract

The story of the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire is extremely complex, and the lessons to be learned from it are still very relevant. Since the dissolution, the factors which led to the collapse of the last Central European Empire have been studied from various aspects by historians and social scientists. Among these studies, two major groups are especially important. The first category of scholars identified external and international causes of the dissolution, while the second group prioritises internal factors as the main reasons behind the collapse. This research recognises the relevance of these analyses, as well as the importance of both external and internal factors in the Empire's dissolution. Although these triggered the disintegration, they cannot be evaluated as the main and only background. The study suggests a geopolitical perspective to analyse the collapse of the state and focuses on three interrelated causes; the transformation of the geopolitical world order – the era of transition, the lack of geopolitical vision and initiative of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy elites, and the consequent weak state-society relations and finally the exclusion from the geopolitical discourse, the changes in imagination, belief, and narrative.

Keywords: Geopolitics, World Order, Transition, Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, Collapse

Özet

Avusturya-Macaristan İmparatorluğu'nun dağılma hikayesi son derece karmaşıktır ve bundan alınacak dersler hala çok önemlidir. Dağılmasından bu yana, son Orta Avrupa İmparatorluğu'nun çöküşüne yol açan faktörler, tarihçiler ve sosyal bilimciler tarafından çeşitli yönleriyle incelenmiştir. Bu çalışmalar arasında iki ana grup özellikle önemlidir. Bilim adamlarının ilk kategorisi, dağılmanın dış ve uluslararası nedenlerini belirlerken, ikinci grup, çöküşün arkasındaki ana nedenler olarak iç faktörleri önceliklendiriyor. Bu araştırma, bu analizlerin alaka düzeyinin yanı sıra İmparatorluğun dağılmasında hem dış hem de iç faktörlerin önemini kabul ediyor. Bunlar parçalanmayı tetiklese de asıl ve tek arka plan olarak değerlendirilemezler. Çalışma, devletin çöküşünü analiz etmek için jeopolitik bir bakış açısı önermekte ve birbiriyle ilişkili üç nedene odaklanmaktadır; jeopolitik dünya düzeninin dönüşümü – geçiş dönemi, Avusturya-Macaristan Monarşisi seçkinlerinin jeopolitik vizyon ve inisiyatif eksikliği ve buna bağlı olarak zayıf devlet-toplum ilişkileri ve nihayet jeopolitik söylemden dışlanma, hayal gücündeki değişiklikler, inanç ve anlatı.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Jeopolitik, Dünya Düzeni, Geçiş, Avusturya-Macaristan Monarşisi, Çöküş

I. Introduction

The history of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, founded in 1867, is still very controversial. For more than 40 years, this multi-national empire was dominant in the geopolitical realm of Central Europe. During this period, it had mixed performances in the economic, social, and political spheres. An excellent illustration of the many contradictions is that while historians refer to the empire as an economically and culturally successful project, for example, the education system raised several Nobel Prize winners, important scientists, but parallelly, over the course of the years, approximately five million people emigrated (mostly as a result of their opposition and discontent with the government) (Bideleux and Jeffries, 1998: 271; Romsics, 2010: 22). Back in its heydays, Vienna was one of the ten largest cities in the world, and the Monarchy¹ was considered as one of the major powers, a player in the European pentarchy (Deak, 2014: 354).

In this context, the Empire's dissolution and the reasons behind its downturn are quite striking. By the end of World War I, the country collapsed very quickly and easily, while its territories were inherited by several successor states, which changed the structure of the region for good. The factors that led to the collapse of the last Central European Empire occupied historians and social scientists, and there are several studies focusing on the subject. These explanations have expanded and changed continuously with time. The first discourse-makers in the 1910s and 1920s were Henry Wickham Steed, Robert Seton-Watson, Namier B. Lewis. They argued for a long decline of the empire, the disintegration of which was unavoidable and inevitable (Gyarmati, 2015: 206). In their analysis, they concluded that the unresolved internal problems – mainly tensions among nationalities, the process of modernisation, anachronistic inside structure – were the cause of the Monarchy's downfall, and World War I just was the final step of it (Barkey, 2006: 168, Szóts, 2016: 51-52, Deak, 2014: 342, 357). The contemporary Hungarian scholar Oszkár Jászi, whose work "*The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy*" was published in 1929, also explained the disintegration by internal problems (Jászi, 1929). Later in the century, the narrative they created was refined and adopted by later generations of historians like Taylor and Kann (Gyarmati, 2015: 206). According to Taylor, another problem was that the Habsburgs could not really connect the parts of the empire (Bideleux – Jeffries, 1998: 275). Alexander Motyl also highlighted fragmentation as a major cause of the fall (Szóts, 2016: 54). In the 21st century, however, a different perspective on

¹ I use „Monarchy” as the synonym for the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

disintegration has begun to emerge. Prominent representatives of this new scientific framework are Sked and Deák, who focused on external and international causes, as well as the First World War, to explain the disintegration of the Monarchy (Barkey, 2006: 169, Deak, 2014: 365). According to Sked, all elements of the state were stable and supported at the beginning of the war (Bideleux – Jeffries, 1998: 273). They are highly critical of previous explanations. According to Deak, the long disintegration and the explanation of internal causes are unsustainable since the Monarchy was in a very good state in 1914 (Gyarmati, 2015: 206). All in all, these "revisionist" historians claim that international changes during the First World War caused the dissolution. The arguments that preceded them are not reliable, as they were invented by biased propagandists during the Great War for political purposes (Deak 2014: 339-340, 365). They also use arguments from the sociology and history of science that highlight the interconnection between power and science, which this study considers very important. The aim of the study is to make a modest contribution to this complex and colourful discourse and analyse the causes of the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. To do so, I adopt a complex geopolitical perspective, since this approach is not usually given sufficient attention in mainstream interpretations. However, the research has led to the conclusion that the impacts of geopolitical processes were very significant. It recognises the relevance of the explanations identified by earlier authors as well as the role of both external and internal factors. Although these triggered the disintegration, they cannot be evaluated as the main and only background. The analysis concluded that the collapse of the state had three interrelated causes: the transformation of the geopolitical world order – the era of transition, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy's elites' lack of geopolitical vision and initiative, and the consequent weak state-society relations and last but not least the exclusion from the geopolitical discourse, the changes in imagination, belief, and narrative.

II. The Explanations of the Collapse in the Scientific Literature

In this chapter, before presenting my analysis, I would like to briefly review the discourse in the academic literature about the collapse of the Monarchy. The positions and views of historians and social scientists and the way they approach the problems are influenced by the generation they come from (Szóts, 2016: 51-52). Overall, most of the studies are on the axis of modernity, anachronism, imperial decline, or political instability (Deak, 2014: 357). Two major groups can be distinguished based on the explanations. The first category includes those who have identified external and international causes, while the second includes those who have prioritised internal elements, such as nationalism, as the main contributors behind the collapse

(Barkey, 2006: 168). The internal causes of dissolution were primarily emphasised by the first generation of scientists, whose members were mainly the creators of contemporary British propaganda, and who, in accordance with their geopolitical aims, created the framework of discussion about the declining Habsburg Empire. Some of the most prominent representatives of this trend are Henry Wickham Steed, Robert Seton-Watson, and Lewis B. Namier, and some of their narratives are still dominant today. These views can be followed in the studies of Robert A. Kann and A. J. P. Taylor (Gyarmati, 2015: 206; Deak, 2014: 339-341). It is critical to note that Steed, Seton-Watson, and others began to shape the discourse of the collapse, focusing on internal factors only. However, as Deak brilliantly pointed out, they were propagandists during the war and saw the destruction of the Monarchy as their goal. They instrumentalised their scholarly studies to justify their political positions and the inevitability of the creation of newly formed nation-states (Deak, 2014: 339-341). These “propagandists” were therefore extremely biased, but they are also important because they created the basis, the framework, and the spirit of many of the explanations which are still alive today, as reflected in the expressions they spread, such as “the prison of nations” created by Robert Seton-Watson (Deak, 2014: 341). Through their press and academic works, they successfully shaped the basic ideas of public opinion, and through the other famous historians who followed them, their views became widespread and adopted in the academic literature (Deak, 2014: 340-341). The creators of the discourse have actively contributed to the transformation of the geopolitical representation and image of the Monarchy, which was very important. This example also highlights the close interconnection between science and power, the significance of dominating and shaping discourses, and the value of having a critical attitude towards authorities. As the outstanding German history philosopher Oswald Spengler expressed the situation: *„What is truth? For the multitude, that which it continually reads and hears. A forlorn little drop may settle somewhere and collect grounds on which to determine “the truth” — but what it obtains is just its truth. The other, the public truth of the moment, which alone matters for effects and successes in the fact world, is today a product of the Press. What the Press wills, is true. Its commanders evoke, transform, interchange truths. Three weeks of press work, and the truth is acknowledged by everybody.”* (Spengler, 2016: 1001).

Prominent scholars who followed the propagandists include Kann and Taylor, who argued in their analyses for a continuing decline, although the role of World War I was present in their interpretations. They argued that it catalysed and accelerated the processes but did not fundamentally change them (Deak, 2014: 343). In their arguments, the collapse was unavoidable. Kann thought the internal forces would have torn the Empire apart necessarily in

the end. Among the internal problems, Motyl focused on regional fragmentation, while others like Wank put the imperial structure or the ethnic situation as the cause of the inevitable collapse (Barkey, 2006: 169; Szóts, 2016: 54; Wank, 1997: 48). Some scholars today have totalised the internal factors to such an extent that they believe the Empire collapsed without external pressure or involvement (Rohac, 2009: 3). The famous contemporary Hungarian social scientist Oszkár Jászi, who also evaluated the dissolution of the Monarchy as a natural process joined this narrative, although not with a propagandistic purpose, but with a much more complex view which also considered external forces (Jászi, 1929: 6). According to him, there were three reasons for the disintegration; the failure of attempts of federalisation, the efforts of neighbouring states to absorb parts of the Empire and eventually the war, which ignited the problems (Bideleux and Jeffries, 1998: 270-271). In his study, he wrote about struggles between centrifugal and cohesive forces. He argued that the state was held together by the following cohesive forces; the Habsburg dynasty, their army, the aristocracy, the Roman Catholic Church, the bureaucracy, capitalism, the free-trade unity, and finally, socialism. Among these factors, the army had the biggest role. According to his analysis, the fall of the Empire was caused by the failure of these forces to act unitedly, and on the other hand, the army got weakened during the war (Bideleux and Jeffries, 1998: 268-269). The authors of this first group – the propagandists, the historians who followed them, and Jászi – described the newly established nation-state system as positive, progressive, necessary, and desirable because of their political or ideological bias (Deak, 2014: 361). The structure of the Monarchy was seen as anachronistic, which was well summed up by the distinguished Hungarian historian István Diószegi, who also stated that the national transformation of Eastern Europe and the elimination of dynastic politics was a historical necessity (Szóts, 2016: 55). While there is much truth in these aspects, the inevitability of transformation in this form is questionable. Seton-Watson claimed that the new nation-state system will be much more stable than the previous ones, which were “artificial” (Jeszenszky, 2019: 10). This study maintains its critique of these positive narratives associated with the creation of the Central European nation-states, as Byrappa expressed: „*We had kingdoms, empires and out of the blue comes the nation-state to rescue humanity from all kinds of burdens.*” (Byrappa: 2006: 9).

This group also contains opinions that emphasise internal factors and identify the Habsburg method of exercising power as the fundamental reason for the dissolution. According to Zamoyski, the main problem was the rule of the Habsburg dynasty, whose power-technical methods had taken away the seeds of conflicts among the nationalities, which caused internal tensions (Bideleux and Jeffries, 1998: 277). In addition, Austrian historiography has identified

the Compromise² as the main cause of the decline because according to their perspective, it paralysed the Hungarian predominance (Csorba, 2018: 76).

Some other scholars explain the causes of the collapse with a combination of external and international factors. These "revisionist" historians are in sharp opposition to the narrative created by Seton-Watson and their group, and the trend which emerged from it. According to them, there were serious problems within the Empire, but there was basically nothing wrong with the Empire until 1914. Something changed during World War I, and that was the decisive factor, not the internal causes (Deak, 2014: 365; Barkey, 2006: 169). In their opinion, the thesis of a long and slow disintegration is untenable. Deak is highly critical of the internal causes' representatives, considering their position outdated (Gyarmati, 2015: 206). The revisionist historians argue that the Monarchy was not on the road to disintegration; on the contrary, it had recovered from the crisis of 1848 and was even more prosperous than ever, it had a strong economy, and imperial policy had worked very effectively until the war (Wank, 1997: 45-47; Deak, 2014: 357). Besides Deak, another prominent member of this side is Sked, who also highlighted that the state was supported by most of its elements at the beginning of the war and was well positioned in international relations (Bideleux and Jeffries, 1998: 273). Furthermore, Clark and Deak see multi-national society not as a problem but as an advantage (Gyarmati, 2015: 206). Scholars from this trend, therefore, attach crucial importance to the war which – in their view – overturned a long and successful period of state development (Deak, 2014: 366). The decisive role of the World War I was also advocated by Mitchell, who considered that the empire had lost control of its management (Mitchell, 2018: 256).

The article does not consider the internal causes to be the primary ones, yet it acknowledges their importance, since they indirectly contributed to all three causes mentioned above, as well as to the Monarchy's failure in foreign policy (Mitchell, 2018: 257). At the same time, the study agrees with Hans Mommsen, external forces encouraged the nationality situation and internal tensions and eventually caused the dissolution of the state (Wank, 1997: 46). This was not the case in 1848-1849. In terms of external forces, while acknowledging the relevance of World War I, the research suggests a broader perspective. As in the case of the first group, considering the views of "revisionist" scientists, there are many truths and important observations about the role of the external forces too, but the essay maintains its position that we should not totalise.

² The Compromise was concluded between the Hungarians and the Austrians in 1867. The treaty created the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

III. The Causes of the Collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy

A. The Transformation of the Geopolitical World Order – The Era of Transition

The first thesis of my paper concerning the causes of the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire is the importance of changing the geopolitical world order. In Braudel's classification, geopolitical world orders belong to the “*moeyenne durée*”, so to the medium-term processes (Taylor, 1993: 34). The two world orders are separated by the period of transition when the rules of the international system are weakened, the behaviour of states becomes more unpredictable, and geopolitical practices and representations also change (Flint and Xiaotong, 2019: 61; GeoDZ). When this happens, the new hegemon – the challenger – becomes the leader in production first, then in economic, commercial, and financial spheres. After that, it will also take the lead in the political arena and will maintain the system with the global rules which it has created with its allies (Taylor, 1993: 36). From the 1890s, the disintegration of the world order had begun, the international geopolitical order built up by the British Empire, the hegemonic one, was in crisis and gradually challenged in many ways by both the US and Germany – the two cardinal main organizers of world economy even today as well – by 1914 (Taylor, 1993: 35, 39; Byrappa, 2020: 44). From the structural perspective, the United States of America was more dangerous as it rejected the – direct – colonial structures and wanted to build its new system based on 19th century nationalism, the right of nations to self-governance and autonomy. This means that world orders are also constructions, so the study argues here – as well as in the second and third cause – we must resort to the instruments of critical geopolitics, which can be defined as follows; “*A central project for critical geopolitics is analysis of the discursive practices by which scholars spatialize international politics: it asks why and how a particular geopolitical narrative is normalized and accepted.*” (The Dictionary of Human Geography, 2009: 122.)

This is related to the collapse of the Monarchy in that, the Habsburg Empire owed its survival in the 19th century to the geopolitical world order constructed under the leadership of Great Britain. Although they suffered a quasi-defeat from the Hungarians in 1848-1849, the system did not allow the internal forces to change the structures, and in times of crisis, the Russian Empire, in harmony with British interests, bailed out the Habsburgs from the crisis. The next major challenge in the struggle between the concepts of German unification occurred in 1866, following the defeat at Königgratz, when it was long in question whether Prussia under Bismarck would occupy Austria or not (Csorba, 2018: 83). This did not finally happen thanks to the dominant geopolitical construction, the principle of balance of power, because even the disappearance of Austria in 1849 and 1866 would have radically disrupted it. During these

decades, hegemonic Britain was still strong enough to maintain the status quo. The forces that challenged the world order, although already in their formative stages, were gradually growing in strength but were far from dominant and could not yet make the breakthrough. This would have required gaining positions in the most important countries and the competitors to weaken. In other words, it can be seen that neither a significant internal nor an external factor caused the end of the empire because the geopolitical world order could maintain it, and the hegemon had a strong vision of the order of Central Europe and was able to implement it.

Thus, in the 19th century, the state was saved from disintegration on several occasions by the British-led and constructed geopolitical world order. Great Britain considered Austria to be the most important state in the balance of power for a long time, and it played an extremely important role as a buffer, preventing the continental empires (Russia, Prussia/ Germany, France) from expanding and strengthening. This narrative was so strong in this period that in 1849 Palmerston saw the prevention of Austria's fall as a British duty (Romsics, 1996: 273). The Empire's position in the geopolitical order was therefore very vulnerable, as its existence and security were depended on its function, and at least one power – but most importantly Britain – always supported it during the crises of the 19th century (Wank, 1997: 53). The circumstances of the existence of the Habsburg State and the role of external forces in it were well understood by Ernest Denis, professor of history at the Sorbonne in 1903: "*It is fashionable to predict the imminent dismemberment of the Habsburg Monarchy but the compelling circumstances that led to the formation of Austria in the 16th century have not disappeared.*" (Romsics, 1995: XXX). Indeed, in 1903 all of this seemed to be the case, but deep-down processes were already underway which would bring spectacular changes in the following years. The Monarchy's elite made consistently bad decisions in this respect throughout the century. They joined the Dual (1879) and then the Triple (1882) alliance which was German-led – the British by this time recognised Germany as the main revisionist power – and consequently distancing themselves from the country that had the greatest interest in the maintenance of the Empire, and even entering the World War I on the side of the Germans (Galántai, 2006: 34; Taylor, 1993: 44). It is also clear from Dennis' words that the opinion leaders linked the existence of the Habsburg state primarily to external geopolitical causes.

The impact of the war was cardinal to the geopolitical world order because the winner had a good chance to create a new one (Taylor, 1993: 44). Interestingly, this had not yet happened, but the period of transition had continued, and a mixed situation emerged. Although the British Empire was still the hegemon, its weakness, disinterest, new challenges and promises made during the war meant that it no longer had a clear vision for Central Europe.

The new rising power, the US, on the other hand, had not yet been able to establish the system of nation-states it had envisioned – it would only be able to achieve this after World War II– (Flint, 2006: 39) and, despite having established the League of Nations as its basic institution, it did not even join to it as the sign of failure. Consequently, in its final form, the organisation was essentially the masking of the power vacuum (Taylor, 1993: 45). The decline of the British Empire and the non-dominance of American structures created the context that made the dissolution of the Monarchy possible. The transition period between the two structures is well illustrated by the contradictions in the peace treaties. In principle, nation-states were established – very controversially led by the two largest colonial empires, Britain and France – but in practice, the usual territorial divisions of the earlier geopolitical conception were applied, and only implemented to the very limited extent the nationality principle and Wilson's principles. Moreover, in the transitional phase, the importance of the region declined, so the promises made during the war and the role of the previously particular, local and relatively weak forces increased (Jeszenszky, 2019: 37). In previous conflicts, there were also great power pledges to “the small players” which usually did not have much effect at the end of the conflicts. This practice still exists today. The primacy of the German settlement and the lack of interest in the future of the Central European region and the consequent drift towards the path of minimum resistance were well expressed by Francis Deak, who said: *"the feelings of many of the participants in the peace negotiations were decisively influenced, and they were primarily concerned about Germany. Once the German peace treaty was concluded, they showed only a superficial interest in the other treaties."* (Győri and Withers, 2020: 212). This is also confirmed by the comments of a contemporary Hungarian geographer and politician, Pál Teleki, who participated in the negotiations: *"German peace accounts for 80 per cent of the importance of this peace, the other four treaties together give the other twenty per cent. Among the Austrian, Bulgarian, Turkish and Hungarian peace, the Entente is most interested in the Turkish question, while the Hungarian question represents no more than four per cent."* (Győri and Withers, 2020: 212). Besides the primacy of the German question in shaping the future, Britain and America were also engaged in a complex conflict with each other (Sharp, 2004: 81). The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, which was born and survived primarily thanks to the geopolitical world order, could not cope with the changes and the expansion of opportunities without external support and adequate internal forces. In the anarchy, actors who had previously been in the background took the initiative, while the weakened and disinterested great powers and the elite of the Monarchy floated with the events.

B. The Lack of Geopolitical Vision and Initiative of the Elite of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and the Consequent Weak State- Society Relations

The second claim of the thesis argues that one of the decisive factors in the collapse of the Monarchy was the lack of a proper geopolitical concept of the elite, which meant that it could not proactively shape its international context, but rather fell asleep and drifted with the events. This is fundamental, as the study maintains that the existence of the empire depended on the geopolitical world order. The reason for this passivity is to be found in the structure of the state, in the document of the Compromise, which was created without publicity by agreement between the elites (Csorba, 2018: 79). According to the distinguished Hungarian scholar István Bibó, the decisive factor in the conclusion of the treaty was the miscalculation of both the Austrian and Hungarian sides, while the former thought that the Hungarians were the main threat, the latter saw reconciliation with the Austrians as inevitable, because of geopolitical reasons (Bibó, 1948: 325). The eminent scholar got to the essence of the matter in his writing: *“They therefore agreed that, in order to save and protect what was important to them: the Habsburgs their empire, the Hungarians their state. The two, however, remained in stark contrast with each other; in fact, in the 19th century, in the process of democratic community-building, they were more at odds than ever.”* (Bibó, 1948: 325). Therefore, the Empire failed to be federalised and remained vulnerable to the geopolitical world order. The situation was aggravated by the fact that an important part of the elite failed to see the fragility of their great power status, while the other part was in melancholy. This pessimism is well illustrated by the opinion of Baron Leopold von Adrian- Werburg, the consul-general of Warsaw: *„We are heading for collapse and partition and do not defend ourselves... After Turkey comes Austria. That is the catchword in Eastern Europe.”* (Wank, 1997: 47). Overall, the lack of a geopolitical concept was caused by the internal rigidity of the structure and the antagonistic geopolitical visions of the most powerful nations within the Empire. This condition plunged Austria-Hungary into the disastrous German alliance, Balkan affairs, and the invasion of Bosnia, in other words, into the gravitational space of rising Germany (Bideleux and Jeffries, 1998: 273; Deak, 2014: 362).

Among the contemporaries, the geopolitical situation of the Monarchy was very sharply perceived by Lajos Kossuth, who was in emigration, and who in the 1870s believed that either the Russians would defeat the Monarchy, or the Germans would force it to expand into the Balkans. As Kossuth said: *“The Hungarians will fight to make Austria-Hungary a Slavic empire”* (Csorba, 2018: 83). Besides the lack of internal reforms, the empire did not have an ideology to compete with pan-Slavism and other nationalisms. As a result, the connection

between the state – and not national/ regional – structures of the Monarchy and society became and remained weak, and as Maureen Healy has pointed out, became broken during the war (Deak, 2014: 364). Austria-Hungary, on the other hand, was determined to prevent the rise of the ideology strongly supported by the Russians, which is why its involvement in Balkan affairs was necessary and inevitable (Csorba, 2018: 84).

Concerning the geopolitical visions, the sharp-eyed critic of the Compromise should be mentioned again. Kossuth was aware of the geopolitical role of the region but also of the internal tensions and social dynamics. His answer was the creative and ambitious concept of the Alliance of Danube Nations, which offered solutions to both cardinal issues. On the one hand, it would have fulfilled the expectations of the existing British-led power structure (Csorba 2018: 78), but it is also remarkable as it was based on an important attempt to shape the discourse actively, and it built on the principles of the next world order which he considered unavoidable even then. Kossuth did not see the imperial structure as a necessary failure, only if it blocked the national aspirations within it (Csorba, 2018: 80-81). Jászi also agreed with him (Barkley, 2006: 169). It must be mentioned that the nationality movements from federalisation to secession were very heterogeneous, but we do not know whether they could have been satisfied by appropriate policies or not (Szóts, 2016: 54; Csorba, 2018: 87). In any case, his innovative vision could not become a reality without changing the structure defined in the Compromise, i.e., changing the state-imperial conceptions – which the imperial elite was not willing to do. The “hermit of Turin” predicted with great foresight that in its present state Austria-Hungary had become the enemy of the West and the East at the same time, and because of its incapacity, its territory would be the prey in the coming war (Csorba, 2018: 79). This is what finally happened. The failure of internal reforms, such as the federal transformation, meant the opportunity to initiate the discourse was taken out of the hands of the imperial elites, and the future of the country and the necessary changes in its structure were shaped by the scientists-politicians of other states and by the hostile nationality leaders.

C. The Exclusion from the Geopolitical Discourse, the Changes in Imagination, Belief, and Narrative

In this part, the study would like to show how the discourse on the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was shaped and changed by certain commentators and propagandists. Alongside the change in the geopolitical world order, the lack of interest in the future of Central Europe and the failure of the Monarchy's elite, this is the third key factor that contributed to the collapse of the state. In the transitional phase of the world order, the geopolitical images, beliefs, and narratives were

also changed. The elite of Austro-Hungary could not take part in the discourse; they were marginalized, while the weakening framework allowed increased activity by their enemies, who eventually took over its shaping.

The changes in the geopolitical discourse are also very interesting because, until 1918, the British elite did not want the dissolution of the state (Bideleux and Jeffries, 1998: 273). This means that radical change took place during the war. Prior to this, the dominant geopolitical perception in England was that the maintenance and survival of the Monarchy were among their fundamental interests (Romsics, 1996: 273). Throughout the 19th century, Britain consistently supported multinational empires according to its power interests, and its elites sympathised with the monarchies because of their own system, so there was also ideological sympathy between them (Jeszenszky, 2019: 6-7, 14). The later British champions of dismemberment were also far from their later wartime views. For example, in 1907, Robert Seton-Watson argued for the unity of the Austro-Hungarian state, and he kept his position until 1911, but even then, he only reached the point of trialism.³ Another great propagandist scholar, Wickham Steed, was also further from his later opinion (Romsics, 1996: 274). Although work on the conflicts within the Monarchy – entitled *Racial Problems in Hungary* – was published in England before the war by Seton-Watson under the pseudonym *Scotus Viator*, its impact only became significant during the war (Jeszenszky, 2019: 6).

In pre-war France, similar debates were taking place. André Cheradame wrote in his book in 1901, that the real enemy of the Monarchy was not Russia and pan-Slavism, but Germany and pan-Germanism, and the inevitable federalisation of the country would tear it out from the German alliance. This was opposed by Jules Chopin, who argued that Slavic control after the transformation would automatically mean a rapprochement with Russia, which was also undesirable, and the only way would be the partition. Overall, Austria – despite all its faults – played an important role in the geopolitical vision of the French elite because of the same reasons as in England (Romsics, 1995). In both cases, we can see that the discourse about the future of the Monarchy depended primarily on the perception of the geopolitical function of the state.

Finally, because of the continuing erosion of the geopolitical world order and the impact of the war, radical changes occurred in both Britain and France about the perception of the Monarchy. By 1914, Seton-Watson was already arguing for the dismemberment of the Empire using British geopolitical arguments and fears besides his sympathies. Central to his concept

³ Trialism is a term to define the Czech's ambition to make the empire a three-centred one.

was the propagation of the idea that only new states would be able to hold Germany back in the future, and Austria-Hungary was not suitable for that. This was also stated by national minority leaders such as Masaryk (Romsics, 1996: 275). The geopolitical dimension played a key role in the discourse; how the Entente elites were thinking about the Monarchy – especially in German relations – had fundamental importance. During 1915-16, Sir Eyre Crowe, several senior Foreign Office officials – Winston Churchill and Sir Edward Grey – also adopted Seton-Watson’s views, while other British leaders who came into office in 1916 and held decision-making positions – Lloyd George, Arthur J. Balfour, and Lord Hardinge – expressed pro-Monarchy attitudes (Romsics, 1996: 276, 279). Both ideas were already on the table at the time, but for practical reasons, they were unwilling to commit to any of them and were also aware of the dangers of Balkanisation (Jeszenszky, 2019: 11; Jeszenszky, 1988: 653). At the same time, the pro-Monarchy turnaround provoked strong protests from emigrant nationalities and their British supporters. As a result, a propaganda journal – the *New Europe* – was set up to create “scientific” knowledge in order to justify the destruction of the Monarchy (Romsics, 1996: 282). However, despite their reports and press, the propagandists were only able to fully take the initiative in 1918, when the leaks of the special peace negotiations – the “Sixtus Letters” – were published, which put Charles in an impossible position before Germany. This forced the emperor to forge an even closer alliance with Berlin, and the British lost their belief in Austria-Hungary's ability to detach itself from its ally and to fulfil its function in the future (Romsics, 1996: 283-284). With this treaty, Charles definitively undermined the geopolitical function and image of his state which had long been considered unquestionable and which defended it in the earlier crisis. However, in the momentary situation of the ruler, the cancellation of the peace negotiations and the close German alliance were not irrational because of the Russian defeat on the Eastern Front and because the changeover would have been very difficult to implement due to practical reasons (Jeszenszky, 2019: 24). From this point, the Monarchy's elites lost their influence in the discourse about their future. They were seen as a satellite state fatally close to the arch enemy Germans, and the last and most important geopolitical argument for maintaining the Central-European empire disappeared (Szóts, 2016: 57, Wank, 1997: 53). Because of this, the propagandists' narrative became dominant to provide all support against the German-Hungarian axis (Jeszenszky, 2019: 30). At the same time, the British colonial empire clearly did not support nationalities because of principle but to weaken the enemy's army and gain a military advantage (Jeszenszky, 2019: 32), and eventually, they became uninterested. In France, a similar struggle between the two sides debating the future of the Monarchy was waged, but at the end of 1917, there was a shift too. It happened because of the loss of Russia and the

appointment of Clemenceau as prime minister and Pichon as foreign minister, they were in favour of dismemberment. The expansion of their ideas was only strengthened by the increasingly close German alliance with the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Romsics, 1995).

The change in geopolitical perception was parallel to the changing world order and the increasingly close German-Austrian-Hungarian relationship. That should also be mentioned that although all the war objectives of France and England were directed against Germany, the territories of the Monarchy were what finally convinced more partners to join the fight on their side (Szóts, 2016: 55-56). This means that the war – and the change in the value of the region – also played an important role in shifting perceptions (Romsics, 1996: 276). The discourse about the future of the state had been settled by the summer of 1918, and the attempts of Teleki and others to change it during the peace negotiations were in vain (Galántai, 2006: 39; Györi and Withers, 2020: 210). The lack of interest in Central Europe and the British focus on other challenges meant that the French power interests dominated the discourse during the negotiations (Romsics, 1995). From this aspect, the new British narrative was perfectly suited to assisting it. The “success” of the peace treaty and the chaos of the geopolitical transition was well illustrated by the fact that even the German question could not be properly resolved, the country remained completely intact, while the fragmentation of the “inter-European” area led to the regression of multi-nationalist constructions in Europe, but instead of stability, it caused balkanization in Central-Europe (Taylor, 1993: 45; Deak, 2014: 380). Moreover, the small states created during the 1930s were easily taken over by Nazi Germany.

IV. Conclusion

The study attempted to make a modest contribution to the analysis of the causes of the rapid collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The process was complex, in which the reasons were interrelated and mutually compounding. Overall, the article concluded – after a brief historiographical overview of disintegration – that the causes of the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy were external and internal but essentially geopolitical. Firstly, the fate of the Empire was linked to the changing geopolitical world order. While the Empire played a key role in the British-led system, the American concepts threatened its existence, but the latter would not necessarily have been destructive if the internal reforms had been successful. During the transitional period, the state's lack of a proper geopolitical vision and its exclusion from the construction of a discourse on its future were particularly serious problems. Since the world system was not stable at the time, and the fate of Central Europe was not considered as important as before, it was possible for earlier particularistic actors to take the initiative and

shape the discourse. The role of these forces and their legacies in the production of geopolitical knowledge and images were and are still decisive today.

The disintegration of the Monarchy is still relevant in many ways. Firstly, we are in a similar period of geopolitical transition, the rules of the international system are changing, and the space for countries to manoeuvre has widened. We can see many examples, like Turkey. The main challengers are China and Russia, which are seeking to change the world order. This situation, as in the early 20th century, challenges the elites of all states. The position of decision-makers is not easy because the choices they make in these critical decades will have a major impact on the long-term future of their country or community. State leaders must correctly perceive and adapt to the changing geopolitical world order. In addition, it is evident that the links between society and the state are weakening – in most the western democracy too – at various levels almost everywhere, and many state elites do not have or do not embrace their geopolitical visions, especially in semi-peripheral, peripheral countries like Hungary. They usually follow the great powers' visions – US, China, Russia – without questioning, which often results in vulnerability and dependence, legitimising their superiority and geopolitical concepts. In many cases, however, the countries have to adapt and choose between the emerging blocks. Nor can it be neglected that the geopolitical concepts are still very closely intertwined with science and the press today. It is not only the geopolitical world order that is changing but also the argument based on geopolitical narratives is back. Being aware of this and actively participating in the formation of geopolitical discourses is also crucial; no country should fall asleep, otherwise, it could easily follow the path of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

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