

Nationalisms in Action:
The Great War and Its Aftermath in East-Central Europe



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Miklós Mitrovits

“Let the Polish know what they can expect of us . . .”
The Polish Question through the Prism
of the Hungarian Élite, 1914–1918

From the perspective of Hungarian politics in the era of dualism, the Polish were the only non-dominant nationality of the Austro-Hungarian Empire that was seen by Budapest in an incontestably positive light. This affection for the Poles derived mostly from the shared history of the two nations and their wars of independence fought shoulder to shoulder in the nineteenth century. After the partitions of Poland at the end of the eighteenth century, the politically engaged members of the Hungarian intelligentsia adopted a fully Polish-friendly stance. Thousands of Hungarians participated and sacrificed their lives in the uprisings fought for Polish independence in 1830 and 1863. Similarly, the Polish provided substantial help to the Hungarians in the Hungarian War of Independence of 1848–1849. During these common struggles for sovereignty, the Polish and the Hungarians were united by the pathos of patriotism. In the last third of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, the Galician Poles were loyal to the Monarchy, thus becoming a factor consolidating the Empire, and unlike the other small nations of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, they were not regarded as a “centrifugal tensioning force.” The attitude of the Galician Poles was not accidental: the Polish nation had been cut into three parts and those of its members who lived in the Austro-Hungarian Empire enjoyed the most favorable position. As opposed to the Germanizing Prussian and the Russianizing Russian territories, the former had a certain degree of self-governance. There were two Polish higher education institutions operating in Krakow and Lemberg (Lviv, Ukraine), Polish-language newspapers and books

could appear, and the Polish upper classes were able to pursue a career even in state administration.¹

Naturally, Polish nationalism had no anti-Hungarian edge whatsoever. Neither of the two emblematic figures of the creation of an independent Poland had any reservations or objections regarding the Hungarian efforts. Roman Dmowski was a proponent of anti-German and anti-Jewish Polish nationalism, while Józef Piłsudski endorsed the concept of a multi-nationality federative state from the beginning.² Hungarian political circles saw the Poles as a historical nation that was prevented from forming a united state only by the contemporary international power constellation. Moreover, the good relations between the two peoples could also be attributed to the fact that the Polish-inhabited Galicia officially belonged to the Austrian Empire and not to the Kingdom of Hungary, which more or less excluded the possibility of any direct Hungarian-Polish conflict of interest.

The Question of Polish Statehood in Vienna and Berlin

All the strata of the Polish society that had been torn into three parts were intent on achieving a single agenda: the formation of a unified sovereign Poland. After the fiasco of the uprising of 1863 in the Russian Partition (Russian Poland) and the creation of the unified German Empire in 1871, it became clear that

1 For the Polish issue before the First World War, see Joel Burnell, *Poetry, Providence, and Patriotism: Polish Messianism in Dialogue with Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Princeton Theological Monograph. Series (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010); Wiktor Sukiennicki, *East Central Europe during World War I: from Foreign Domination to National Independence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland in Two Volumes, vol. 2, 1795 to the Present* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982); Maciej Janowski, *Polish Liberal Thought before 1918* (Budapest–New York: CEU Press, 2004); Piotr S. Wandycz, *The Lands of Partitioned Poland, 1795–1918* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975); Wojciech Roszkowski, *Najnowsza historia Polski 1914–1945* (Warsaw: Świat Książki, 2003).

2 Piotr S. Wandycz, "Poland's Place in Europe in the Concepts of Piłsudski and Dmowski," *East European Politics and Societies* 4, no. 3 (1990): 451–468; Andrzej Walicki, "The Troubling Legacy of Roman Dmowski," *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 14, no. 1 (December 1999): 12–46.

the international context would not allow for the modification of the borders. Consequently, the concept that gained more and more ground in Galician Polish political circles, especially among “Cracovian Conservatives,” was the so-called Austro-Polish solution. Essentially, this scenario would have implied that the Russians would be expelled from the region, i.e., from the territory of the Kingdom of Poland, with the help of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Next this territory would unite with Galicia, and crowning a member of the Habsburg dynasty, it would join the Austro-Hungarian Empire within the framework of a real union. All of the above, however, presupposed that the dualist system based on the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 would be transformed into a trialist arrangement. Because of that, many looked to Galicia as a kind of “Polish Piedmont,” or the potential starting point of Polish unification.³

Besides the Austro-Hungaro-Polish trialism based on a real union, the Austro-Polish concept existed in other versions as well. According to one of the ideas, after the liberation of Russian Poland (i.e., the Kingdom of Poland, also called “Congress Poland,” created within the framework of Russia by the Congress of Vienna in 1815) and its unification with Galicia, the new Polish state-to-be would have joined the Austrian Empire with an agreement similar to that concluded between the Hungarians and the Croats in 1868. Accordingly, based on the Croatian-Hungarian analogy, a so-called subdualist system would have been established between Austria and Poland. According to another version, the new Poland would have united with the Kingdom of Hungary. In fact, the latter solution would not have been unprecedented: let us recall the reign of King Louis the Great. As a first step, it was proposed already in the 1870s that Galicia and Bukovina, i.e., the Principalities of Halych and Lodomeria, should be detached from the Austrian state and returned to the Kingdom of Hungary since these territories had been conquered by the kings of the Árpád dynasty a long time ago, thus the Kingdom of Hungary could justly claim them.⁴

The Austro-Polish ideas were reinforced with the outbreak of the First World War. After the Russian victory on the Eastern Front at Przemysł in March 1915, Austria-Hungary was able to push back the Russian army with German

3 Zoltán Tefner, “Ausztria-Magyarország lengyelpolitikája I,” *Valóság* 7 (2003): 47–63;

Tefner, “Ausztria-Magyarország lengyelpolitikája II,” *Valóság* 8 (2003): 36–58.

4 *Ibid.*

assistance. Following the breakthrough at Gorlice (Gorlice-Tarnów Offensive) on May 2–5, 1915, the Central Powers recaptured Przemyśl, Lemberg and Warsaw. With that, Russian Poland came under the occupation of Austria-Hungary and Germany.

From spring 1915, the occupied territories needed to be dealt with not only on a military level, but also in terms of public administration and state law. Since extensive Polish territories came to be attached to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the question of the unification of the Polish lands was also raised. It was clear from the very beginning that if the occupied Congress Poland was united with Galicia, it would produce such an impressive territory inhabited by Poles and Ukrainians that it would, first of all, jeopardize the majority of German-speaking inhabitants, and second, it would inevitably boost the popularity of the idea of Polish independence.

At the same time, in contrast to the Austro-Polish concept, there existed another thought regarding the future of Poland. Since Austria-Hungary would have been unable to capture these territories without Germany's military force, it had to take into consideration German intentions as well. That was the case even if initially the German government did not show much interest in the Polish question. However, it must not be forgotten that the Germans cherished political, economic, ideological as well as military and security policy goals in relation to the Polish lands just liberated from Russian oppression. Granting independence to the Polish territories that had already been occupied by the Germans—i.e., the Grand Duchy of Posen annexed to the Kingdom of Prussia, Chelm or Gdańsk—was, of course, out of the question.

Among the numerous German concepts, this paper will focus on the most important one. Its core idea was that a buffer state (*Pufferstaat*) would be created in the territory gained after defeating and pushing Russia back to the east. The German military staff considered this zone between Germany and Russia to be a military springboard, which was to be subordinated entirely to German military objectives. Naturally, Berlin planned to draft the local inhabitants and also to exploit the natural resources of the area (especially coal). Practically, this puppet state would have included all of the former Russian Polish territories, regardless of the fact that the southern parts of

the latter (with Lublin as its center) had been under Austro-Hungarian occupation all throughout the war.⁵

After the outbreak of the First World War, but still before the breakthrough at Gorlice, i.e., from August 1914 until May 1915, Austro-Hungarian diplomats formulated four different proposals aimed at solving the Polish question:

1. An Austro-Polish concept based on nineteenth-century traditions, the essence of which was that all of Congress Poland would be annexed by the Austro-Hungarian Empire according to a plan to be elaborated later on.
2. After defeating Russia, Poland would be split up between Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire.
3. A buffer state would have been created between Germany and Russia from the Polish territories, Lithuania, and Courland. This entity would have become a German satellite state.
4. With the exception of Galicia, all Polish territories would have been incorporated by Germany.

The second version had the highest degree of support within the Austro-Hungarian political élite. It turned out very quickly that because of the Hungarian government's insistence on dualism, the Polish territories annexed by Austria-Hungary could not be accorded a status similar to that of Austria and Hungary. In that context, the proponents of the "subdualist system" had the upper hand. What that meant was that the Polish-Ukrainian territories were related to Austria in the same way as Croatia was related to Hungary. With the progression of the war, it was the fourth scenario that became increasingly popular among the German political and military leadership; that is, Poland was to be divided into two parts after the war as well.

⁵ Zoltán Tefner, "Ugron István és a német külpolitika 1918 áprilisában–májusában," *Századok* 6 (2011): 1423.

The Question of Polish Statehood in the Policy of the Hungarian Parliamentary Parties

Until May 1915, the Polish question did not appear on the Hungarian agenda. It was considered so secondary that from summer 1914 until the end of 1915, not a single parliamentary speech focused specifically on the Polish question. The policy advocated by Count István Tisza, the Hungarian prime minister, was in sharp contrast both with the idea of the creation of a sovereign and autonomous Poland and with that of the transformation of the Austro-Hungarian Empire into a trialist system. For Hungary, the first scenario would have entailed the loss of Galicia, while the second would have meant the end of dualism. For Tisza, only two concepts were acceptable: Poland would either come under German rule or it would join the Austrian Empire in a “subdualist” framework without injuring the Austro-Hungarian dualist system.

From January 13, 1915, Austria-Hungary got a Hungarian minister of foreign affairs in the person of István Burián. He was appointed after the breakthrough at Gorlice. Not surprisingly, he contacted the German government immediately concerning the Polish issue. He went to Berlin with the “subdualist plan” supported by Tisza, the plan which had been elaborated by Austrian Prime Minister Karl von Stürgkh. This proposal, however, was too much for Germany and too little for the Poles because it would not have guaranteed Polish independence in military affairs, budget and foreign policy. Although a Polish king would have been elected, Vienna would have delegated a general governor to Warsaw. In other words, executive power would have remained in the hands of Vienna. What is more, Galicia would have been divided on an ethnic basis into Polish and Ukrainian parts.

The person who challenged Tisza’s policy the most vehemently was one of the leading figures of the Hungarian parliamentary opposition, Count Gyula Andrásy the Younger. A proponent of trialism, Andrásy tried to obtain Berlin’s support for the cause already in November 1914. Tisza reacted at once, and informed the Germans that the public law structure of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was unalterable. Count Gyula Andrásy launched a series of articles on the Polish subject in autumn 1915 in *Magyar Hírlap* and *Neue Freie Presse*. He first spoke about the Polish question at length in the Hungarian National Assembly on December 7, 1915. According to Andrásy,

although the Polish question did not figure among the military objectives of Austria-Hungary, it needed to be dealt with in public due to the historic developments.

Andrássy's basic position was that the Polish lands acquired would have to be utilized in order to resolve the Polish question. He formulated two theses:

1. It would be a cardinal mistake to return the historical Poland to Russia once the military actions have been resolved. For that would entail the healing of Russia's Achilles heel because Poland would realize that it had nothing to gain from the victory of Central Europe, that destiny had chained it once and for all to Russia and that it would have to give up all hope of being ever liberated from this yoke.
2. We must not expose Poland to the danger of partition again. Whatever solution should be found for the question, we must exclude the possibility that another operation be performed on the body of the Polish nation, otherwise this policy would result in turning yet another race that had been attracted to us into our enemy, and with that we would commit a sin.⁶

Obviously, the second thesis raised the question of what should happen to the Polish lands occupied by the Germans. For there was no word of the German Empire renouncing its part of these lands acquired at the end of the eighteenth century. If only the Russian and the Austrian parts were to be united, Poland would still remain divided. Andrássy did not go into that, but he did mention that if Russian Poland was to become a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, then it should be united with Galicia, and the trialist public law structure should be introduced. He did not consider the creation of an independent Polish state to be feasible; he questioned the viability of such a state—just as in the case of Hungary.

While Andrássy approached the Polish question from the perspective of public law and geopolitics, at the parliamentary session of December 9–11, 1915,

⁶“Parliamentary session 593 on December 9, 1915,” in *Az 1910. évi június hó 21-ére hirdetett Országgyűlés Képviselőházának naplója* (hereafter abbreviated *KHN*), vol. 27, May 7–December 21, 1915 (Budapest: Athenaeum Irodalmi és Nyomdai Részvénytársulat Könyvnyomdája, 1916), 328.

several speakers emphasized the Polish affiliation with the West and cultural connections. The first speaker, Sándor Giesswein, began by pointing out that the Poles had always been allies of Hungary: "They always fought alongside the Hungarians whenever freedom was at stake."⁷ As Giesswein put it, "Wherever the Hungarian national flag is waving, it must signal in the future as well that people are fighting for freedom here and that they shall not fight on behalf of the oppressors of peoples."⁸ This statement could be interpreted in only one way: if the Hungarians went into battle in Polish territories and helped expel the Russians, it was not to let the Germans take the place of the Russians. Károly Huszár, also an MP of the Catholic People's Party, went even further. He talked about a single political nation: "It is desirable that the unfortunate Polish nation, which has suffered so much over the centuries, should persist as a single political nation and that it should not be partitioned once again."⁹ Count Móric Esterházy, who briefly filled the position of prime minister in 1917, highlighted the cultural aspects. In his speech, he said that the Polish "population was the vanguard of Western civilization for centuries, thus it can make a claim for the cultivation of its cultural needs even under the current temporary administration."¹⁰ In his reply, Tisza rejected these approaches, and made it clear that "the governance of a hostile territory under military occupation is a military task." In addition to the military command, there were civilian staff as well, and already from a linguistic aspect, it was better for the staff to be Austrian.¹¹

The reason that this debate took place in the Hungarian National Assembly at the end of 1915 was that as of October 1, two General Governments had been created with their seats in Lublin and Warsaw and were occupied and directed by the Austro-Hungarian and the German armies, respectively. The Hungarian opposition wanted to ensure that these Polish territories would not be governed exclusively by the military, but that there would also be a civil public administration set up in parallel, and that the Polish could express their

⁷ *KHN*, December 9, 1915, vol.27, 364.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *KHN*, December 10, 1915, vol. 27, 422.

¹⁰ *KHN*, December 9, 1915, vol. 27, 380.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 381.

cultural and political needs. This, however, was not to be. What is more, even the earlier autonomy of Galicia was terminated.

In contrast to the above, the Hungarian government believed in early October 1915 that it would have been more favorable for the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Hungary to sign a separate peace with Russia than to annex Russian Poland. Tisza made sure to limit even the manifestation of the Hungarian society's sympathy for the Polish at assemblies and sympathy demonstrations.

The Reception of the Mitteleuropa Plan in Hungary and the Polish Question

In the meantime, the German Empire's interest was also piqued by the Russian Polish territories. At the end of 1915, the Germans were considering the implementation of the so-called Mitteleuropa Plan, and they proposed that Austria-Hungary receive the Russian Polish territories if it formed a customs union with Germany in exchange.¹² At this point, Minister of Foreign Affairs Burián tried to persuade the German government that these solutions would only reinforce the concept of Polish independence. In Burián's opinion, some sort of a state would have to be created for the Polish as soon as possible, and their destiny should be placed into their own hands. This argumentation was in accordance with the Polish political events that had taken place since the outbreak of the war. Already on August 14, 1914, the Juliusz Leo-headed National General Committee (Naczelny Komitet Narodowy) was set up in Krakow as the supreme military, treasury and political institution of Galicia. The aims of this institution were to unite the Polish territories liberated from

12 Friedrich Naumann, *Mitteleuropa* (Berlin: Reimer, 1915). For a description of the *Mitteleuropa* conception, see Henry C. Meyer, *Mitteleuropa in German Thought and Action, 1815–1945* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1955); Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Der Erste Weltkrieg. Anfang vom Ende des bürgerlichen Zeitalters* (Bonn: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2004), 94–117. Jürgen Elvert, “‘Irrweg Mitteleuropa’ Deutsche Konzepte zur Neugestaltung Europas aus der Zwischenkriegszeit,” in Heinz Duchhardt and Małgorzata Morawiec, eds., *Vision Europa. Deutsche und polnische Föderationspläne des 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhunderts* (Mainz: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 117–137.

Russian occupation with Galicia and to transform the Austro-Hungarian Empire into a tripartite structure.

With that in mind, the Poles had recourse to the military as well. At the behest of Józef Piłsudski, three Polish Legions were set up under the National General Committee. The First Brigade was headed by Piłsudski himself in the territory of Podhale, the Second Brigade was subordinated to Józef Haller and fought mostly in the Carpathians and Bukovina, while the Third Brigade was sent to the Lublin region. There were altogether approximately 25,000 soldiers fighting in these three brigades. The Polish Legions took part in combat until they were called back at the end of 1916. Meanwhile, Piłsudski created the Polish Military Organization (*Polska Organizacja Wojskowa*), which carried out intelligence and diversionary tasks in the area occupied by the Russians. Thus, at the end of 1915, the politicians of the Hungarian opposition and Minister of Foreign Affairs Burián—going against Hungarian Prime Minister István Tisza and the Berlin government—were theoretically pressing for what the given situation actually demanded if they wanted to keep up with the Polish initiatives.

However, the German government was so adverse to the plans of Burián and other Polish-friendly politicians that in early 1916 the issue clearly began to drive a wedge between Austria-Hungary and Germany. Finally, Germany laid its cards on the table in April 1916. German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg declared that Berlin did not support the Austro-Polish concepts, and that they would either create a German puppet state, or Poland would remain divided according to the occupied territories.

Italy's entry into the war in summer 1916 produced a substantial change in the relations of Germany and Austria-Hungary. The latter was significantly weakened by the regrouping of its troops on the Italian Front, and taking advantage of this, the Russians launched an attack in the east. During the Brusilov Offensive, the military of the Austro-Hungarian Empire suffered a serious blow. From then on, Vienna was politically devalued in the eyes of Berlin, and its opinion regarding the Polish question carried less weight.

The above had repercussions in the Hungarian National Assembly as well. In his parliamentary speech delivered on September 16, 1916, Count Gyula Andrássy spoke about the Polish question as well. He shared his conviction that "a whole series, an entire chain of the gravest foreign policy and governmental

mistakes have been committed in this question, too, from the first minute to the last.”¹³ Count Tivadar Batthyány spoke about the Poles in much more passionate terms. He called them the sister-nation of the Hungarians, and alluded to the fact that “the Hungarian nation has always condemned the abolition of the Kingdom of Poland, the territorial partition of the Polish state, and the party demanded that the government should take a stand in the Polish question and exert an influence, and (. . .) [the party demands] a national government, state-level existence, and a national army for the Polish people.”¹⁴ Moreover, he criticized the government for not having carried through with its promise to the Polish nation to liberate it: “This is a promise that was made in the name of a nation, and staying true to this promise is not only a matter of honor, but also a moral duty.”¹⁵ Therefore, Batthyány also said it was a mistake to have immediately divided Russian Poland into two parts following its occupation and to have placed four governments under Austro-Hungarian administration with Lublin as their seat. Instead of another partition, Batthyány asserted unequivocally that “Russian Poland must without a doubt be developed into a single and united national state.”¹⁶ He then continued:

Every Polish individual has a natural desire and wish to see the old Kingdom of Poland restored, all the former Polish territories united in one national state, and all the Poles gathered in one national state so that they can get back their former independence as a sovereign national state. I cannot interpret the term liberation in any other way than the latter solution. [. . .] Both the Austrian and the German governments must rise to the height where they can enforce our great interests, the general interests of all of us, of Germany, Austria and Hungary, and by ceding certain territories if necessary—as it will be—they must create an independent Polish Kingdom, a sovereign national state, establishing

13 *KHN*, September 6, 1916, vol. 31, 491.

14 *KHN*, September 14, 1916, vol. 32, 161.

15 *Ibid.*

16 *Ibid.*, 162.

its appropriate relation, its appropriate nexus with the Monarchy and through the dynasty.¹⁷

During the war, this was the first Hungarian parliamentary address that took an unequivocal stance in favor of the creation of an independent, sovereign Polish Kingdom, and which took as a starting point that the partitions should be reunited. Batthyány closed his speech by saying that “this is in the interest of Hungary, but also of Austria and of Germany.”¹⁸ For this 20-million-inhabitant Kingdom of Poland would be grateful to Germany and Austria-Hungary, and this “liberated Polish nation will stand as a bastion against a potential future attack of the Russian colossus.”¹⁹

Three days later, Member of Parliament Gábor Ugron demanded the floor and analyzed the Polish situation at length. He addressed his harsh criticism of the Austrian government (!) for having introduced in the occupied territories a military public administration unacceptable for the local Poles. According to Ugron, the military governors, the Hungarian hussars, the Czech policemen and the (naturally) non-Polish-speaking clerks who had been sent there had made life unbearable for the Polish. Ugron stated:

After the breakthrough at Gorlice came the occupation of Russian Poland. This automatically evoked the idea that the ancient big Polish nation should be revived, and a new state should be constituted for the Polish. This would have its own political and military advantages, namely that a territory that is geographically wedged between us and Germany would not belong to the Russian Empire with a huge military apparatus, but it would be an independent state.²⁰

However, what was happening in reality was just the opposite. Instead of introducing a system better than that of the Russians, the Austro-Hungarian state was “Germanizing to the detriment of those who had fought against the Russification. Women and children have been collected in internment camps,

17 Ibid., 163.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 *KHN*, September 19, 1916, vol. 32, 217.

whose only sin was that they were of Russian Polish descent, and whose virtue was that they wanted to live under the scepter of our ruler.”²¹

Ugron urged the government to do something against the situation that had evolved:

War is not a goal in itself; it is only one of the tools of diplomacy. And the aim of diplomacy cannot be the total annihilation of a victorious war by poor public administration. The situation should be remedied before it is too late. For in contrast to Germany, Austria-Hungary has not yet declared—either solemnly, officially or confidentially—what fate should await the Polish nation after the end of the war.²²

Prime Minister István Tisza qualified Ugron’s words as “harsh and unilateral” criticism. In his opinion, it did not help the cause if the members of parliament treated that question in “such a manner.” At the same time, he did not deny a single word of Ugron’s nor did he say anything about the future that he envisioned for the Polish. This was not the first time that Tisza gave an evasive answer to a direct question.²³ Tisza’s “reply” was not left without response by Count Albert Apponyi either. He, too, called the prime minister to explain why Austria-Hungary was procrastinating with regard to the issuing of a clear statement regarding the future of the Polish.²⁴

On November 5, 1916, Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph and German Emperor Wilhelm II issued a joint manifesto in order to win the sympathy of the Polish population: they announced the creation of a Polish state from the territories liberated from Russian occupation (though no borders were designated). The declaration of the two emperors was a disappointment for the Polish population and political élite because it made no mention of the borders of the future country and said nothing about the unification of the tripartite Poland. Nevertheless, it was a positive development that this was the first time that two of the three partitioning powers interfered with the internal affairs of the third power, which meant that Polish question had become an

21 Ibid., 219.

22 Ibid., 222.

23 Ibid., 304.

24 Ibid., 326.

international issue and no longer represented an internal affair of the three occupiers.²⁵

Not much later, certain changes took place that fundamentally modified the Austro-Hungarian management of the Polish question. Franz Joseph passed away on November 21, 1916 and Charles I of Austria (Charles IV of Hungary) became the new ruler. Minister of Foreign Affairs István Burián was replaced by Ottokar Czernin on December 22. Therefore, it was no accident that Count Tivadar Batthyány, the chief proponent of Polish independence in the Hungarian National Assembly, brought up the Polish question again on December 11, 1916. He called the proclamation of the two emperors “a dog’s breakfast” that was unfeasible in its existing form and would only generate uncertainty and distrust among the Poles, thus bringing only despair. Batthyány was of the view that it should have been clearly stated what kind of Poland the Hungarians would like to see after the war: “Let the Polish know what they can expect of us.”²⁶ In his opinion, the statement that should have been issued was that “we will demand an entirely independent big Polish Kingdom. This would be a grand oeuvre of grand times.”²⁷ As for Germany, he said that “in order to secure its own borders, it could make the sacrifice of liberating those poor Poles who had enjoyed everything under Prussian rule but the faintest freedom.”²⁸ Finally, he called attention to the fact that this proclamation implied tacitly that the future Poland would sooner or later become a German puppet state—not quite the outcome for which the Austrian and Hungarian soldiers had been fighting. What Batthyány meant by that was that Germany was considering the creation of a buffer state between itself and Russia—a plan completely unacceptable for the Polish.

Prime Minister István Tisza replied to Batthyány’s remarks, and without actually refuting the representative’s claims, he just said that in the given situation, public criticism aimed at the activities of the governments did not help the Polish cause. Moreover, he asked the opposition’s representative not

25 Adam Dziurok, Marek Gałczowski, Łukasz Kamiński and Filip Musiał, *Od niepodległości do niepodległości. Historia Polski 1918–1989* (Warsaw: IPN, 2010), 19.

26 *KHN*, December 11, 1916, vol. 33, 54.

27 *Ibid.*

28 *Ibid.*

to arouse such desires in the Poles that would be impossible to satisfy. Tisza declared:

I think there are two dangers that threaten an adequate solution to the Polish question: one of them is if we manage to raise doubts in the Polish nation concerning the seriousness and efficiency of the solution initiated by Austria-Hungary and the German Empire, and the other is if we manage to awaken such desires and aspirations in the Polish nation that exceed the extent of feasibility.²⁹

The Central National Committee (Centralny Komitet Narodowy) reacted to the declaration of the two emperors on November 16, 1916, and it demanded the creation of a Polish government. As a result of this, a Temporary State Committee was established on January 14, 1917. A few days later, on January 22, the war objectives announced in the United States Senate by President Woodrow Wilson included “the creation of a united, independent and sovereign” Poland.³⁰ On February 10, strikes broke out in St. Petersburg that escalated into a revolution by the end of the month. Clearly, the international power landscape was changing radically, thus altering the weight of the Polish question as well.

The Hungarian political élite was not blind to these changes either. Unsurprisingly, Tivadar Batthyány rose to speak again on February 10, 1917, in the House of Representatives. He observed that Berlin had completely taken the upper hand in the Polish case vis-à-vis Vienna; what is more, the whole affair had been mismanaged from the very beginning. But this time he criticized the fact that although the creation of an independent Polish army had been proclaimed, and Hans Hartwig von Beseler—the military general governor of the Russian Polish territories occupied by the Germans—was trying to organize this army, in reality the governments of the Central Powers were doing everything in their power to prevent it from being established. Batthyány also objected to subordinating the Polish Legions to the German army. Batthyány asserted:

²⁹ *KHN*, December 13, 1916, vol. 33, 91.

³⁰ Roszkowski, *Najnowsza historia*, 32–33.

The right policy would have been to send as many Hungarian statesmen, officers and generals there as possible, and to entrust the difficult task of establishing the Polish Kingdom to as many Hungarians as possible because in that case the performance of the Hungarians would have been received with the fullest confidence, whereas it is undeniable that be it the Prussians or the Austrians, they will encounter a certain distrust due to memory of the past.³¹

The Germans indeed assumed control over efforts to resolve the Polish question beginning in early 1917. Although Vienna maintained its claim for at the least the territory under Austro-Hungarian occupation, the Germans were already demanding the evacuation and handover of the Austrian general government. Meanwhile, István Tisza noted with pleasure that the German plans would be implemented, leaving the dualist system intact, i.e., the Polish case would cause no “interference.”

However, the Hungarian prime minister was wrong. Polish political and military leaders demanded even more autonomy on the basis of the declaration of the two emperors. On May 28, the Polish Circle in Vienna urged the unification of the three Polish territories and total independence. Piłsudski made a similar statement. These actions led to the so-called Oath Crisis. On July 9–11, the First and Third Brigades of the Polish Legions refused to swear allegiance to the emperor, which was mandatory in the German and the Austro-Hungarian armies. The Second Brigade was transformed into the Polish Auxiliary Corps, operating within the army of Austria-Hungary. In response, the Germans arrested about 90 Polish leaders and imprisoned Józef Piłsudski in the Fortress of Magdeburg. At the end of August, Germany dissolved the Temporary State Committee, too.³² In other words, it was the concept of the German buffer state that was gradually put in practice.

After the Bolshevik October Revolution in 1917, Russia quit the war, Austria-Hungary shifted its remaining forces to the Italian Front and the construction of the German puppet state was continued in the Polish territories. As a matter of fact, it had become clear by April 1917 that the government of Austria-Hungary had renounced its claim to control over the territory. Minister of

³¹ *KHN*, February 10, 1917, vol. 34, 184.

³² See Roszkowski, *Najnowsza historia*, 36.

Foreign Affairs Czernin declared that Austria-Hungary was willing to give up Galicia and would consent to the creation of a German-dominated Poland. True enough, in autumn 1917 Austria-Hungary returned to its Austro-Polish plans for one last time: it set up the Regents' Council, summoned the members of the latter in Vienna, and promised a personal union to them. What is more, Vienna began to organize the trip of Charles I of Austria to Warsaw, but in the end this initiative came to nothing.

On November 20, 1917, István Tisza interpellated his successor, Prime Minister Sándor Wekerle, on the Polish matter. He questioned the government about its plans and whether it would maintain the dualist system. Wekerle gave two guarantees in his reply:

First of all, in all circumstances, we shall protect the parity situation of our state, its autonomy provided by the law as well as its economic interests; and second, we shall confer jurisdiction in the matter of the protection of these interests and the solution of this issue in general as regards the relation of the new Polish state to our Monarchy to the competent legislative authority.³³

At the same time, Wekerle was unwilling to make a promise regarding Poland's sovereignty.

On January 8, 1918, President Wilson presented his famous Fourteen Points. Point 13 stated the following: "An independent Polish state should be erected which should include the territories inhabited by indisputably Polish populations, which should be assured a free and secure access to the sea, and whose political and economic independence and territorial integrity should be guaranteed by international covenant." However, the leadership of the Austro-Hungarian Empire seemed to be unaware of world politics. After the announcement of Wilson's Fourteen Points, on February 12 the delegations of the Central Powers, which had originally conducted negotiations with Soviet Russia, made peace with the Ukrainian People's Republic in Brest and ceded the Chelm region to Ukraine in exchange for food. The so-called "bread peace"—according to which Berlin and Vienna recognized Ukraine in exchange for food supplies—caused a tremendous uproar among the Poles.

³³ *KHN*, November 20, 1917, vol. 37, 364.

No wonder: while the Entente Powers were discussing the possibility of a united independent Poland, the leadership of Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire were already sacrificing the territories of a Poland that had not even been constituted.³⁴

On February 22, 1918, Count Tivadar Batthyány interpellated Prime Minister Wekerle specifically about the detachment of the Chelm region. The speaker sympathized with the exasperation of the Poles; moreover, it was rumored that other lands would also be detached from the Kingdom of Poland. In his reply, Wekerle assured Batthyány that “this question will be resolved with the observation of the entire peace treaty, and with the mutual satisfaction of the parties, honoring the Polish interests.”³⁵

However, Polish military leaders were not so optimistic. Upon learning about the loss of Chelm, the Polish Auxiliary Corps under the command of Józef Haller refused to follow further orders and marched to Rarańcza in order to join the Second Polish Corps that had seceded from the Russian Army. On May 11, 1918, the united Polish forces fought a battle against the German troops near Kaniów. Although they lost, the battle had immense symbolic importance. This marked the first instance in which Polish forces that had been fighting on opposite sides joined forces to reconquer Polish territory. After the defeat, captured Polish soldiers were interned in Huszt (Khust, Ukraine), while Haller fled to France. On June 3, 1918, England, France and Italy issued a common statement in the “Wilsonian spirit”: “the creation of a united and independent Polish state, with free access to the sea, is one of the conditions of durable and just peace and of a rule of law in Europe.”³⁶

At that point, the common Austro-Hungarian minister of foreign affairs was no longer Czernin, but Burián (again), who delegated Gábor Ugron to serve as special representative of the minister of foreign affairs in Warsaw. Burián’s Polish-friendly stance did not change, and Ugron was considered to be an expert on Polish matters. Burián insisted on the reunification of Poland and supported the personal union to be concluded with the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Burián had a second argument up his sleeve. He declared

34 Spencer Tucker, Laura Matysek Wood and Justin D. Murphy, eds., *The European Powers in the First World War: An Encyclopedia* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 1996), 707–708.

35 *KHN*, February 22, 1918, vol. 38, 457.

36 Roszkowski, *Najnowsza historia*, 41.

that without Galicia, Austria-Hungary would be confronted with “political misery”: its economy would be weakened, it would lose its advantageous military-geostrategic position, and in terms of domestic policy, it would be stripped of one the factors cementing the empire together. Naturally, the Germans discarded his argument. For them, the existence of an independent Poland would have posed a great danger because of Posen, Western Prussia and Danzig.³⁷

On May 14, 1918, pro-government MP Sándor Dobieczki took the floor regarding the Polish matter. He started by saying that it would be an enormous mistake to depart from the “historic foundations” and leave more room for ethnic self-determination. He, too, criticized Austrian diplomacy for having ceded Chelm to the Ukrainians:

Now instead of reinforcing the Polish and thus erecting a wall between our Ruthenians and the Ukrainians, Austrian diplomacy demolished even the existing one, and it did so at a time when there was a possibility that Hungary, Austria and the new Kingdom of Poland would unite their forces under the scepter of the Habsburg dynasty in a personal union in an effort to achieve their political and economic independence against German expansion as well as Russian encroachment that may become potentially dangerous once again in the future.³⁸

Next Bobieczki explained that by German expansion he meant the excessive economic weight of Germany. As opposed to that, he would have deemed it favorable if the 45 million inhabitants of the Austro-Hungarian Empire were to continue their economic struggle reinforced by the 20 million inhabitants of the new Poland. In Dobieczki’s view, the Hungarians should have acquired the Polish markets: “Having played such an insignificant role in the domain of foreign trade in the past, we should grab the slightest opportunity to obtain this new market.”³⁹

37 Zoltán Tefner, “Ugron István és a német külpolitika 1918 áprilisában–májusában,” *Századok* 145, no. 6 (2011): 1449.

38 KHN, May 14, 1918, vol. 39, 165.

39 *Ibid.*, 167.

Batthyány seconded the Labour MP Dobieccki in saying that an independent Poland could help Hungary “to achieve (. . .) [its] political and economic independence against the German expansion as well as the Russian encroachment that may become potentially dangerous once again in the future.”⁴⁰

However, in the end, Batthyány seemed to have backed away from his earlier firm position when he summarized the possible scenarios:

On my part, I hold the view that today the only possible solution is to set up the Kingdom of Poland within the framework of a pure personal union under the rule of His Majesty the King. What the Entente is promising, i.e., that it will unite all the Poles, including those in Posen and so on, is a utopia, and the Poles know very well that it would go way beyond the possibilities of feasibility. On the other hand, it is also quite certain—and again, the Poles know it the best—that the restoration of the Russian Polish royal territory to a kingdom without Lithuania on the one hand and without Galicia on the other, not to speak of the territory of the Chelm Government, would be an incomplete work that would once again conceal the seeds of discord and reclamation, and which would pose the gravest danger for Austria because irredentism would naturally flare up in Galicia.⁴¹

In conclusion, we can say that during the First World War, the Hungarian governments supported Polish efforts to gain independence as long as they did not affect the dualist system. This was especially true with regard to the position of Prime Minister Count István Tisza. The ultimate solution with he could identify was the Austro-Polish subdualist scenario. Naturally, the opposition always demanded more from the government. Gyula Andrásy the Younger was the only politician who overtly supported trialism, i.e., the creation of an Austro-Hungaro-Polish state. Tivadar Batthyány urged the creation of a unified and independent Poland as early as autumn 1916. But reality was different. Neither trialism nor a united Poland stood a chance during the war because the military outcomes tipped the balance in favor of

40 Ibid., 321–322.

41 Ibid., 324.

Germany, and the concept that came to the fore was that of the German buffer state. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that even in this situation, the opposition members of the Hungarian House of Representatives considered it important to take a stand in favor of an independent Poland with reference to the links between the two nations. We can affirm that during the war, the contemporary opposition acted as the nation's conscience and the voice of the thousand-year-old Polish-Hungarian friendship.

However, autumn 1918 overwrote the plans of both the Hungarian government and the leadership of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After 123 years of partition, Poland was revived from its ashes on November 11, 1918. By that time, the Aster Revolution had already taken place in Hungary and Mihály Károlyi was appointed to form a "people's government." István Tisza was assassinated at his home in Budapest on October 31, 1918. The Czechs and the Slovaks proclaimed their independence on October 28–30, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire de facto ceased to exist. The ruling emperor, Charles I of Austria, relinquished the throne on November 11 in Austria and on November 13 at the Castle of Eckertsau as Charles IV, King of Hungary. At the same time, the future borders had not been demarcated either for Poland or for Hungary. Hungary's borders were determined by the Paris Peace Treaty signed on June 4, 1920, while the definitive shape of Poland was laid down by the Peace of Riga concluded on March 18, 1921.

But even before that, Hungary and Poland had officially established diplomatic relations with each other on October 31, 1919, and Hungary supported the Polish with arms and munitions in their fight against the Bolsheviks. In other words, Polish-Hungarian relations continued to be founded upon mutual assistance even after the First World War.