

**Krisztián Csaplár-Degovics:**

**Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Habsburg Colony (1878-1918) – a Hungarian Perspective**

**Abstract**

Historians have struggled to interpret the colonial status of Bosnia-Herzegovina, especially historians in the successor states, because the Habsburg Empire itself officially denied the idea of any colonization, the provinces were not treated as colonies by public law, and the political elites of the successor states were also dismissive about this idea.

This paper argues that MPs in the Hungarian sub-empire, both opposition and government, unanimously thought of Bosnia-Herzegovina as a colony between 1878 and 1918. The analysis of public debates on colonization demonstrates that MPs possessed and applied the necessary political concepts to define and talk about colonization, without most of them having any knowledge of the colonial practices in overseas empires and their legitimization in international law. However, these political concepts had clear Central-European origins and had nothing to do with their transatlantic counterparts.

**Keywords**

Colonialism / empire building in Central Europe, Austria-Hungary, concept of colony / colonialism, civilizing mission of Hungary

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## Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Habsburg Colony (1878-1918) – a Hungarian Perspective

### *Introduction*

If one takes a closer look at the colonial past of the European states at the turn of the century, only one empire's place remains blank on the map. This white patch on the continent is none other than Austria-Hungary.<sup>1</sup> The lack of relevant research on this issue can partly be traced back to the fact that the idea of being a colonial power did not fit into the former self-image of the Habsburg Empire. And after its collapse in 1918, the national historiographies and political elites of the successor states of the Danube Empire denied the possibility of a colonial past even more vehemently than the previous imperial propaganda had.<sup>2</sup>

Another reason for the lack of relevant research is that it is difficult to apply theories and perspectives related to colonialism to the former Danube Monarchy. On the one hand, the current theories were basically formulated through investigations of the colonial past of transatlantic and not East-European countries. On the other hand, the terminology of international diplomacy and law was far from being as uniform prior to 1914 as it has been suggested by international historiography. The Habsburg Empire, for instance, had its own imperial terminology and its own concepts, among other things, in connection with empire building and colonization.

That is why until now there have been so few publications that systematically scrutinize the colonial past of Austria-Hungary. However, there are some case studies, mostly related to the history of the Austro-Hungarian Bosnia-Herzegovina, based on which some historians refer to the Danube Monarchy as a colonial empire. Moreover, a comparative study of occupied Bosnia-Herzegovina and British India and British East Africa has begun.<sup>3</sup>

### *Austria-Hungary, as a colonial empire – an analytical approach*

The following investigation is based on empirical experience and facts dating from around the turn of the century. Firstly, while conducting research in the Austrian National Archive, one can often come across unpublished documents according to which the diplomats of the British Foreign Office and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarded the Habsburg Empire as a colonial power. And it is without doubt that the British and French diplomatic corps in the 19<sup>th</sup> century did know more about colonialism than the historians of 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> century Central Europe, most of whom even today refuse to consider that the Danube Monarchy may have had a colonial past. Secondly, in the *Institute Colonial International*, founded in 1894 in Brussels, each country was assigned a number of seats that was in accordance with its supposed "colonial

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<sup>1</sup> Ruthner, Clemens: *Habsburgs ‚Dark Continent‘. Postkoloniale Lektüren zur österreichischen Literatur und Kultur im langen 19. Jahrhundert.* Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto Verlag, 2017. 17–18.

<sup>2</sup> Sauer, Walter (hgg.): *K. u. k. kolonial. Habsburgermonarchie und europäische Herrschaft in Afrika.* Wien: Böhlau, 2007. 7–8.

<sup>3</sup> Okey, Robin: *Taming Balkan Nationalism. The Habsburg 'Civilizing Mission' in Bosnia 1878–1914.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007; Ruthner, *Habsburgs ‚Dark Continent‘*; Gammerl, Benno: 'Imperialistische Situationen: Ostafrika und Bosnien.' In: Gammerl, Benno: *Staatsbürger, Untertanen und Andere. Der Umgang mit ethnischer Heterogenität im Britischen Weltreich und im Habsburgerreich 1867–1918.* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010. 151–216.

importance". One of the member states was Austria-Hungary.<sup>4</sup> Researchers of the Habsburg Empire even today tend to pass over the investigation of facts like this.

According to the above, one has reason to suppose that if Austria-Hungary was indeed a colonizing empire, then the evidence for this statement might also be proven by investigating the history of the Hungarian sub-empire. This paper scrutinizes the debates in the Hungarian House of Representatives in which the terms *colony* (*gyarmat*) and *colonialization* (*gyarmatosítás*) were used.

#### *Occurrences of the term "colony" in the debates of the Hungarian House of Representatives*

When analyzing the ideas and vocabulary of the debates in the House of Representatives, three important observations can be made. On the one hand, it turned out that the word *colony* had many meanings in Hungarian political discourse and that the political concept of *colonialism* in Hungary was not of Western European origin, but had Central European roots. On the other hand, it has become clear that Bosnia-Herzegovina, which was occupied with the authorization of the Congress of the Great Powers in Berlin (1878), was considered an Austro-Hungarian colony in the Hungarian House of Representatives between 1878 and 1918. Thirdly, the question of how the Hungarian political and economic elite approached the issue of empire-building and colonialism after 1867 can be answered.

Between 1878 and 1914, the term *colony* or *colonization* was used in a total of 522 interpellations or speeches in the Hungarian House of Representatives. More than two-thirds of the interpellations were presented by politicians of the opposition parties, basically members of the Party of Independence and '48th, which rejected the system of dualism.

Figure 1: The proportion of occurrences of the term 'colony' in the debates of the Hungarian House of Representatives (made by Zsolt Bottlik)

The various meanings of the word *colony* fall into eight categories. If one analyzes the relevant interpellations based on categories, then the first group is definitely made up of those that proved to be practically useless from the point of view of our investigation. Such categories were when the term *colony* was used as a synonym for settlement / site / establishment or diaspora; or when referring to the African and Asian colonies of other colonial powers; or perhaps when the speakers argued that the Danube Monarchy had no colonies. The reason is simple: based on the above statements, it only seems that the representatives viewed the world basically through the bipolar dichotomy of colonizer-colonized and saw no legal, political or economic difference between the British, French, Italian, Spanish, German, Dutch or Danish colonies or overseas dependencies. The term *colony* was a collective concept within which no different categories emerged.

#### *Political interpretation of the term "colony"*

The situation is quite different when we analyze the interpellations in which the Kingdom of Hungary was referred to as a colony of Austria (50.9%), in which occupied Bosnia-Herzegovina was considered an Austro-Hungarian colony (4.2%), or in which Austria-Hungary appears as an empire that aspired to acquire colonies at global level (7.4%). In these debates, the evolution of the Hungarian concept of *colony* and its semantic field can be very well investigated. The

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<sup>4</sup> Wagner, Florian: *Colonial Internationalism and the Governmentality of Empire, 1893-1982*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 24, 60.

interpretation of the term *colony* used in the House of Representatives at the turn of the century, regardless of whether it referred to the word as a political, economic, philosophical or cultural concept, was rooted in the self-image of the Hungarians, or better said in a real or assumed historical situation. It was based on the assumption that the Kingdom of Hungary was in a colonial position within the Habsburg Empire prior to 1867. The political memory of this assumed or real historical situation was shared by both the governing and the opposition parties. The political interpretation of the term *colony* in regard to Hungary became theoretical in the speeches of one of the leaders of the national opposition, Ferenc Kossuth (son of Lajos Kossuth) between 1898 and 1901. During these years, Joint Foreign Minister Agenor Goluchowski made an open attempt to develop Austria-Hungary into a great power with overseas colonies (Rio de Oro, Tianjin).<sup>5</sup> Some elements of Kossuth's interpretation had already existed before, but they came together for the first time in his speeches. According to the politician, a colony is an agrarian country producing agricultural and raw products that is economically dominated and controlled by a more industrialized state. Economic control is exercised by the more industrialized state as the sole proprietor of the customs and trade policy, which also enables it to create a safe market for its own manufactured goods in the colonized agrarian country.<sup>6</sup> This interpretation of Kossuth remained basically unchanged in the debates in the Hungarian Parliament until 1914. (On the one hand, this definition described the relationship between Austria-Hungary and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and on the other hand, it can also be **useful** for the theorists dealing with the colonialism of our time.)

Scrutinizing the speeches in which the interpellators reflected on Austria-Hungary as an empire capable of launching global colonial actions (7.4%), and in which the term *colony* is used in connection with Bosnia-Herzegovina (4.2%), it can be clearly proven that between 1878 and 1918 the Hungarian political public (and the political and economic press as well) regarded Bosnia-Herzegovina as an Austro-Hungarian colony. The contributors, both opposition and government representatives, did not disagree on the question of whether or not the occupied provinces were colonies, but rather whether the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (compared to various British, French, German and Russian analogies) was a good colonizer and whether it was pursuing an appropriate colonial policy. Moreover, they reflected on the extent and manner to and in which the Kingdom of Hungary should participate in the tasks of the joint empire to be carried out in Bosnia, i.e. which goals the Hungarian political elite should pursue in their effort to participate in the governance of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

### *Hungary takes on a colonial mission*

One of the unexpected consequences of the relevant debates (1898-1903) was that a major political campaign was launched in the Budapest parliament against the “despotic” governing practices of Benjámín Kállay, joint minister for finance, and the governor of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The opposition parties formally attacked the governor, but the relevant debate was actually about the direction in which the joint empire should develop in the future, and how the civilizing mission of the Hungarians should fit into the foreign political aspirations. The features and consequences of this debate in Hungary strongly resemble the **impeachment trial of Warren Hastings** in Great Britain.

<sup>5</sup> Besenyő János: ‘Az Osztrák–Magyar Monarchia lehetséges afrikai gyarmata: Rio de Oro.’ *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* 131, 4. szám (2018): 856–884; Falser, Michael: *Habsburg Going Global. The Austro-Hungarian Concession in Tientsin / Tianjin in China (1901-1917). With a Historical Introduction by Georg Lehner*. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Speeches and interpellations of Ferenc Kossuth, *Képviseleti napló* 1896–1901, vol. XVI. (p. 86), vol. XVII. (p. 24), vol. XXXI. (p. 46) and *Képviseleti napló* 1901–1906, vol. I, 36. Source: *Képviseleti naplók 1867–1914*. Budapest: Athenaeum, 1867–1914.

#### **[K1] megjegyzést írt:** Infobox:

##### *Impeachment Trial of Warren Hastings in Great Britain (1788–1794)*

Warren Hastings was the first governor-general of the East India Company in Bengal. In 1788 he was accused with corruption, abuse of power and use of violent political means in the British House of Commons. The prosecution was represented by Edmund Burke, who held the entire East India Company responsible for Hastings' despotic policies. The parliamentary trial and the political, philosophical and social debate that ensued soon broadened, and in time became a two-issue debate: whether the British nation has the right to rule other nations, and if so, whether that power should be despotic or democratic. The speeches at the trial examined the relationship between liberal principles and human rights *and* the imperialism and colonialism of the state (whether the state can abuse its power over its subjects in conquered territories).

Image 1: Benjámín Kállay (1839-1903) on the terrace of the joint Ministry of Finance in Vienna, 1890. Source: Jósza András Museum, Kállay Collection, 2011.260.1.24. ([https://en.mandadb.hu/tetel/91196/Kallay\\_Beni\\_18391903](https://en.mandadb.hu/tetel/91196/Kallay_Beni_18391903))

Kállay's policy was considered despotic by the opposition because it was not restricted by any legislation. According to Hungarian liberal thought, all states and empires without a constitution were despotic. 1867 marked a turning point in the life of Habsburg Central Europe because the Hungarian political elite succeeded in forcing the two states that made up the newly reorganized empire (Austria-Hungary), the Austrian Kaiserstaat and the Kingdom of Hungary, to continue to function on a constitutional basis. With this act, the Habsburg dynasty also broke with the practice of exercising unlimited power over the peoples of the empire it ruled. As Hungary civilized Austria by forcing it to establish a constitution in 1867, the main goal of the Hungarian civilizing mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina was to give the occupied provinces their own constitution. For the Hungarian opposition, constitutionality and the rule of law were the conditions for participating in the colonial governance of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Coming to the third point, it is important to state that, based on the parliamentary debates on colonialism, the claim of international historiography that the political and economic elites of the Hungarian sub-empire impeded or hindered the colonialization efforts of the joint Ministry of Foreign Affairs, can be clearly refuted.<sup>7</sup> The social elite groups of the Hungarian sub-empire were, under three conditions, ready to support the imperialist and colonial policy of the joint empire. (1) The target area of this policy should not be Africa or Asia, but the Balkan Peninsula. (2) The foundations of the dualist system should not have to be renegotiated because of this policy, i.e. colonization should not become another joint issue, and should not receive a fourth joint ministry. (3) Finally, the term colonialism should never be used to refer to these ambitions.

#### *Colonial mission and Hungarian national tradition*

Finally, the national opposition of the House of Representatives reconciled with the colonial aspirations, and came to actively support them, even after 1908. The reason is simple: they were able to connect colonial politics with the nationalist traditions of Hungarian liberalism. In the possibility of extending the Hungarian constitutional principles to Bosnia-Herzegovina, they no longer saw a rights-depriving expansion in line with the Habsburg absolutist traditions, but a rights-enhancing integration in line with the Hungarian liberal traditions. They believed they would modernize and civilize the inhabitants of Bosnia-Herzegovina through colonization, and thus, in addition to expanding the European legal order, they would also fulfil their civilizing duties towards humanity.

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<sup>7</sup> Kolm, Evelyn: *Die Ambitionen Österreich-Ungarns im Zeitalter des Hochimperialismus*. Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2001.