

Great Britain, Italy, the “oppressed nationalities,” and the dissolution of Austria-Hungary in the First World War

Marina Cattaruzza

University of Bern

Abstract

This contribution aims to analyse the process of dissolution of the Hapsburg Empire during WW1. In 1917, the Entente powers found themselves in a difficult military situation, due principally to two factors: a) the outbreak of the Russian revolution and the coming into power of the Bolsheviks, who immediately signed an armistice with the Central powers and exited the war; b) the catastrophic defeat of the Italian army in Caporetto by joint Austrian and German forces.

In this uncertain circumstance, a network of Italian politicians and journalists relaunched the slogan of “self-determination for the oppressed nationalities”, utilizing it as a non-conventional weapon adopted to overcome their country’s military weakness. The programme of self-determination was solemnly proclaimed in Rome in April 1918, in the presence of Italian Prime Minister Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, delegates of the Entente powers, the United States, and, of course, self-declared representatives of the “oppressed nationalities”. This congress signed the death sentence of the Hapsburg Monarchy: from then on, the Entente powers and the USA progressively backed the formation of the new “national” states” of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. Ironically enough, the principle of self-determination was not a decisive factor for the outcome of the war. The victory of the Entente was determined much more by the American intervention on the side of the French and British troops on the Western front. Consequently, we may consider the dissolution of the Hapsburg Monarchy a side effect of a failed propaganda campaign aimed at regaining the upper hand over the enemy.

Key words: Austria-Hungary, First World War, Italy, self determination, War Propaganda.

Premise

In the recent wave of scholarship and publications that has accompanied the one hundredth anniversary of the First World War one can hardly find any studies that offer new insights into Italy’s role in the course of the war and its eventual end.¹ That is remarkable for the reason

¹ This is also confirmed by Nicola Labanca in his careful study of the Austro-Italian front: “The Italian Front,” in Jay Winter, ed., *The Cambridge History of the First World War* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 4 vols.), vol. 1 [Global War],

alone that after Russia and Romania exited the war, the Italian army was the only one that continued to fight Austria – a circumstance that significantly impaired the military potential of the Central Powers.² Austrian troops were tied down along the Italian-Austrian front at the Veneto and were not able to reinforce the German Western front during Erich Ludendorff's crucial offensive in spring 1918. This may have tipped the scales in favour of the Entente powers in the "race against time" waged by the Germans, that is, their attempt to defeat the French and British troops, drive a wedge between the two armies, and occupy Paris before the American forces were fully ready for deployment.³

However, the account here is not concerned with the military role the Italian army played in the outcome of the First World War. Rather, it focuses on Italy's advocacy of the breakup of the Habsburg Monarchy and the creation of two new, independent states – Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. These were not goals the Italian government and its diplomatic corps had pursued when that country entered the war in May of 1915. Instead, they arose out of the difficult military situation the Western powers found themselves in after the Italian defeat at Caporetto and the nearly simultaneous exit of Russia from the war. In these troubling and dangerous circumstances, the appeal to the "right of self-determination" of the "oppressed nationalities" became an effective tactical weapon that played a crucial role in determining the subsequent course of the war and the post-war scenario. Within the Entente alliance, Italy was the first major actor which, in the person of Prime Minister Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, came out officially in favour of the right of the nationalities within the Habsburg Monarchy to

pp. 266–296, esp. p. 295. On the Austro-Italian front see also Nicola Labanca and Osvald Überegger, eds., *La guerra italo-austriaca 1915–18* (Bologna, Il Mulino, 2014).

² On this see Leo Valiani, *La dissoluzione dell'Austria Ungheria* (Milan, Il Saggiatore, 1966), p. 468.

³ See Wolfgang J. Mommsen, "Deutschland," in Gerhard Hirschfeld, Gerd Krumeich and Irina Renz, eds., *Enzyklopädie Erster Weltkrieg* (Paderborn, Ferdinand Schöningh, 2003), pp. 15–30, esp. P. 27f.; Ronald Schaffer, "USA," in *ibid.*, pp. 105–115, esp. pp. 110–112. As late as July 1918, 650,000 troops were still fighting on the Austrian side of the Austro-Italian front. See Mark Cornwall, *The Undermining of Austria-Hungary. The Battle for Hearts and Minds* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, London, Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000), p. 406. Because of the German spring offensive, American troops were deployed earlier than planned (1919). Initially, they fought under the command of the French general Ferdinand Foch. An independent American army existed only from September of 1918. Still, the presence of the American troops was crucial to the failure of the German offensive, which, after some early but non-decisive successes, was halted in May 1918. Adam Tooze has described the inexperienced American soldiers who were deployed on the Western Front in the spring of 1918 as "a fresh crop of healthy, well-fed young men of prime fighting age, the likes of which had become depressingly rare in Europe." See Adam Tooze, *The Deluge. The Great War and the Remaking of Global Order, 1916-1931* (London, Allen Lane: Penguin Books, 2014), p. 204.

withdraw from their shared polity – and it did so at a time when both Woodrow Wilson and Lloyd George were still reckoning with the persistence of the multi-ethnic state (even in case of its defeat).⁴ In fact, as late as in January 1918 both the American President and the British Prime Minister still officially supported the preservation of Austria Hungary, merely suggesting a federal transformation of the state's structures. From a public speech by Lloyd George, held on 5th January 1918 in London in the presence of Trade Unions functionaries, one may even infer that the British Prime Minister was ready to shave down radically the territorial claims of Italy and Romania in exchange for a peace treaty with Austria⁵.

Admittedly, Italy was not fully alone in its attempt to undermine the existence of the Habsburg Empire. In fact, since the outbreak of the First World War a trans-national network of politicians, intellectuals, and journalists had come into being with the aim to destroy Austria-Hungary and put in its place so-called “national states”⁶. Yet, without the backing of at least one of the great powers, the influence of such pressure groups was condemned to remain pretty futile. The interplay between Italy and the groups devoted to Austria-Hungary's destruction constitutes the core of this article.

⁴ Helmut Rumpler is one of the few historians who mention – even if only in passing – Italy's role in the “liquidation” of Austria-Hungary. See Helmut Rumpler, “Die Todeskrise Cisleithaniens 1911–1918. Vom Primat der Innenpolitik zum Primat der Kriegsentscheidung,” in Helmut Rumpler, ed., *Die Habsburgermonarchie und der Erste Weltkrieg*, Vol. 1: *Der Kampf um die Neuordnung Mitteleuropas*. Part 2: *Vom Vielvölkerstaat Österreich-Ungarn zum neuen Europa der Nationalstaaten [Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918*, Bd. IX], (Vienna, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2016), pp. 1165–1256, here p. 1224f.

⁵ See Address of the British Prime Minister (Lloyd George) before the Trade Union Conference in London, January 5, 1918, in: *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS) 1918. Supplement 1: *The World War*. Vol. 1, Washington 1933, 4–12; Address of the President of the United States Delivered at a joint Session of the Two Houses of Congress, January 8, 1918, in: *ibidem*, 12–17; Arthur S. Link (Ed.), *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 45 (Princeton 1984), 534–539. Wilson's “fourteen points”, were intended as a draft for the settling of Europe after the war. The territorial claims addressed to the German Reich were surprisingly moderate: certainly Germany should abandon all the occupied territories. Besides, the Reich was requested to return Alsace-Lorraine to France and to concede to a reborn Poland territories „which were unquestionably inhabited by Poles”. See also Kenneth J. Calder, *Britain and the origins of the New Europe 1914-1918*. Cambridge 1976, 125f; Valiani, *La dissoluzione dell'Austria Ungheria* (Anm.2), 353f.

⁶ Valiani, *La dissoluzione dell'Austria Ungheria* (note 2), 207-211, 278f. In Paris the main point of reference for the Czech separatists was Edvard Beneš, a closed collaborator of Masaryk. In the French capital resided also the Slovak Milan Štefanik who agitated vehemently in favour of a union between Czechs and Slovaks, a perspective that at the time was anything but self-evident. On this remarkable personality see Francesco Leoncini, *Alternativa mazziniana*, Roma, Castelveccchi, 2018, p.124-133, 163-196.

Austria delenda est

Among those who advocated, from the very outset, the destruction of the Habsburg state and the application of national criteria in the creation of new states in East-Central and South-Eastern Europe belonged in Great Britain in particular the journalist Wickham Steed and the Scottish historian Robert Seton-Watson.⁷ Within the British Isles, both men were broadly acknowledged as experts of the Habsburg Monarchy. And not without good reason: they had spent a number of years in this multi-national empire, authored relevant books on its conditions,⁸ and had pushed for a stronger recognition of the rights of its national groups. Robert Seton-Watson had devoted himself chiefly to the problems of the Southern Slavs in Hungary.⁹ He enjoyed tremendous popularity among the southern Slavic population, a popularity he relished in a somewhat childlike manner. For example, in a letter to his uncle George Seton he recounted a visit to Dubrovnik (Ragusa at the time) in February of 1912, following the publication of his book *The Southern Slav Question*: “Last night was the crowning event of our adventurous tour. The major of Ragusa... and 60 other Ragusans gave us a big banquet at the Hotel Imperial, at which the three town bands played alternately below the window. This is **the first time in history** that all the parties of Ragusa have met upon a common platform... Most wonderful of all, the three bands – Croats, Serbs and Pravasen (Members of the Party of Right) massed together at the end and played 1st the Croat, then the Serb hymn – a

⁷ See Hugh und Christopher Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe*. The work, written by the two sons of Robert Seton-Watson, is strongly biographical and is based primarily on their father’s papers at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies in London. On Henry Wickham Steed see his autobiographical work *Through Thirty Years 1892-1922. A Personal Narrative*, New York 1925, 2 voll. Steed saw the destruction of Austria-Hungary as the primary strategic goal of the war, a way of depriving Germany once and for all of an important satellite: *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 38. Furthermore, the destruction of the Habsburg Monarchy through a skilful use of the “nationalities question” seemed realistic to him: *ibid.*, pp. 53, 94f., 97, 130. John Deak, *The Great War and the Forgotten Realm: The Habsburg Monarchy and the First World War*, in: “Journal of Modern History”, vol.86, 2014/1, p. 336-380, here p. 339f. See also Calder, *Britain and the origins of the New Europe* (note 5), pp. 8–10. Calder characterized the British advocates of independence for the “oppressed nationalities” as follows: “(...) a group of scholars and journalists, usually of liberal persuasion, who believed in national self-determination and who might be called liberal nationalists in order to distinguish them from those liberals like H.A.L. Fisher and Viscount Bryce, who were sympathetic towards subject nationalities but also suspicious of nationalism because of its potential illiberal tendencies” (p. 8f.).

⁸ Henry Wickham Steed, *The Hapsburg Monarchy* (London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1913).

⁹ Robert W. Seton-Watson, *The Southern Slav Question and the Habsburg Monarchy* (London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1911). Recently, Larry Wolff has rightly pointed out that the mere assumption that a “Southern Slav question” existed put the existence of the Habsburg Monarchy in question: “The Western Representation of Eastern Europe on the Eve of World War I: Mediated Encounters and Intellectual Expertise in Dalmatia, Albania and Macedonia,” in *Journal of Modern History*, No. 86, June 2014: pp. 381–407, esp. p. 381.

little as if an Orange band in Belfast were to play Nationalist airs! For the Party of Right's programme does not recognize the existence of the Serbs!... Next day when we left Gravosa [the harbour of Ragusa] half the people of the town saw us off, and almost every lady and most of the students came with bunches of flowers to present to May... As we sailed off, they threw confetti rockets and sang Hej Slovani, the Slav hymn."¹⁰ It would seem that Seton-Watson was fully swept away by the effective staging of the national closing of ranks. In this exuberant atmosphere, he saw himself as the initiator of Yugoslav unity. By contrast, Wickham Steed, the correspondent of *The Times* in Austria-Hungary, was a much more sober personality. In his 1913 bestseller *The Habsburg Monarchy*, he certainly accorded it the right to exist as a state, merely suggesting an internal reform. In ten years of constant observation and experience, he declared in the book's preface, he had failed to discover a sufficient reason why the Habsburg Monarchy should not retain its rightful place within the European community of state. He saw her internal crises as crises of growth and not of decline.¹¹

It was circumstances that changed the minds of these two intellectuals and transformed them into staunch advocates for the liquidation of the Habsburg state. After the outbreak of the First World War, the possibility that the Danubian Monarchy might be dissolved had moved closer – all the more so, once a Czech and a Yugoslav exile committee had been set up in London in 1915, which pushed for an independent Czech-Slovak and Yugoslav state, respectively.¹² In reality, the change in the position of these two British observers was less radical than might appear at first glance. A strengthening of the Southern Slav, Czech, and Slovak national groups – which is what they meant by “reform” – would invariably have

¹⁰ Hugh Seton-Watson et al., eds., *R.W. Seton-Watson and the Yugoslavs – correspondence 1906–1941* (London: British Academy, 1976), 2 vols., vol. 1, p. 99. The episode is also mentioned by Woolf, *The Western Representation of Eastern Europe* (note 9) p. 387-389.

¹¹ Henry Wickham Steed, *The Habsburg Monarchy* (note 8), p. XIII. On Steed's stance towards the Habsburg Monarchy before the July crisis, see Christopher Clark, *Die Schlafwandler. Wie Europa in den Ersten Weltkrieg zog* (Munich: DVA, 2013), p. 106. According to Clark, the nationality struggles that were waged there did not have a separatist character.

¹² Woolf, *The Western Representation of Eastern Europe* (note 9), p. 403; Valiani, *La dissoluzione dell' Austria Ungheria* (note 2), pp. 157, 163–165, 200, 203. On the geographic location of the Czech Committee, which maintained important contacts in Paris, see Francesco Caccamo, “I cechi, la Prima guerra mondiale e la dissoluzione dell'Impero asburgico,” in Paolo Pombeni, ed., *La Grande guerra e la dissoluzione di un Impero multinazionale* (Trento: Fondazione Bruno Kessler Press, 2017), p. 187-199, here p.195.

amounted to a weakening of the so-called “master nations.”¹³ Needless to say, the same goal could be achieved – with even greater certainty – by dissolving the Habsburg Monarchy and creating (ostensibly) national successor states on its territory. Wickham Steed, in particular, had always looked upon Austria-Hungary as Germany’s satellite in East-Central Europe.¹⁴ Still, he remained largely isolated in this view. Nevertheless, he could count on the support of Viscount Northcliffe, whose publishing empire included *The Times*.¹⁵ During the July crisis of 1914, the latter was one of the few dailies in Great Britain which charted a consistent war path from the very beginning.¹⁶

Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia as a project

Wickham Steed¹⁷ and Robert Seton-Watson combined their phobia of Austria and Hungary with a vision of the creation of a Czechoslovakia and a Yugoslavia that was supposed to crystallize

¹³ This label, referring to the Germans and the Hungarians of the monarchy, was coined by Lewis Namier, a British historian of Galician descent. On Namier see Andrea Graziosi, “Il mondo in Europa. „Namier e il ‘Medio oriente europeo’, 1815–1948”,” in *Contemporanea. Rivista di storia dell’800 e del 900*, No. 10, 2007/2: pp. 193–228.

¹⁴ He repeatedly advanced this notion in his memoirs already in the pre-war period. See, for example, *Through Thirty Years*, vol. 1, pp. 345–348. A similar position was also taken by Lewis Namier before the outbreak of the war. See Deak, *The Great War and the Forgotten Realm* (note 7), p. 341. From the beginning, Robert Seton-Watson also had a similar assessment of the relationship between Germany and Austria. See Calder, *Britain and the Origins of the New Europe* (note 5), p. 81.

¹⁵ On Viscount Northcliffe see S. J. Taylor, *The Great Outsiders: Northcliffe, Rothermere and the Daily Mail* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1996), esp. p. 73–222.

¹⁶ See Clark, *Die Schlafwandler. Wie Europa in den Ersten Weltkrieg zog* (note 11), pp. 629, 692.

¹⁷ In Wickham Steed, a pronounced Germanophobia was combined with a deep anti-Semitism. Like many politicians and intellectuals from the “oppressed nationalities” of the Habsburg Monarchy, Steed also saw the Jews as an important pillar of German nationalism. Further examples of this kind of view already in the pre-war period can be found in *Through Thirty Years* (note 7), vol. 1., e.g., pp. 337, 356, 374, 376, 404, 412. On the spread of similar notions among the nationalist Romanian parties in Bukovina see Andrei Corbea-Hoisie, “„Wie die Juden Gewalt schreien“: Aurel Onciul und die antisemitische Wende in der Bukoviner Öffentlichkeit nach 1907,” in Marina Cattaruzza and Constantin Jordachi, eds., *Antisemitism and the Holocaust in East Central Europe: New Research Trends and Perspectives*. Special issue of “*East Central Europe*,” No. 39, 2012/1: p. 13–60. On the occasion of the failure of the Badenische Sprachverordnungen, veritable pogroms erupted in Prague, directed equally against German and Jewish property. See Andrew G. Whiteside, “The Germans as an Integrative Force in Imperial Austria: the Dilemma of Dominance,” in *Austrian History Yearbook*, No. 3, 1967/1: p. 157–200, here p. 190f. On Steed’s view of the Germanophile and Austrophile role of the Jews and “international finance” (to him one and the same thing) during the First World War (he interpreted any attempt at a compromise peace as impermissible sympathy for the Central Powers), see *Through Thirty Years* (note 7), vol. 2., p. 129, 139, 195. On Germanophobia as a constant in Steed’s thinking, which was in place long before the outbreak of the First World War, see also Laszlo Peter, “R.W. Seton-Watson’s Changing Views on the National Question of the Habsburg Monarchy and the European Balance of Power,” in *The Slavonic and East European Review*, No. 82/3 (July 2004): pp. 655–679, here p. 665f. On Steed’s anti-Semitism - in general, see Andre Liebich, “The Antisemitism of Henry Wickham Steed,” in *Patterns of Prejudice*, No. 46, 2012/2: pp. 180–208, esp. pp. 183, 187.

around the core state of Serbia. This view put them in a distinct minority until the second half of 1917. To be sure, as we have seen, a Czech and a Yugoslav committee had been created in London. However, each committee was made up of only a handful of men who represented just themselves and were not taken particularly seriously by either the British government or the Foreign Office.¹⁸ According to Leo Valiani, a historian of Hungarian-Jewish descent who was born in the Hungarian port city of Fiume, the Czech committee counted no more than a handful of supporters in the period following its founding.¹⁹ Still, Seton Watson was able to procure for the university professor Thomas Garrigue Masaryk, the committee's leading intellect, a professorship at the newly established School of Slavonic and East European Studies at King's College.²⁰ This institute would give rise later to the renowned London School for Slavonic Studies. Revealingly enough, Masaryk chose as the topic of his inaugural lecture in 1915 "The Problem of the Small Nations in the European Crisis."²¹

The situation was even more difficult for the Yugoslav committee.²² The Serbian government, beginning with its popular Prime Minister Nikola Pašić, could not be won over to the prospect of a Yugoslav state. Its territorial aims, which also drew prompt support from the Entente powers, concerned Bosnia, the Bačka, and western Banat, that is to say, regions with a substantial Slavic-Orthodox population. In addition, Pašić was interested in expanding the Serbian possessions in Macedonia at the expense of Bulgaria and in securing for Serbia the cosmopolitan port city of Thessaloniki.²³ Since a portion of the population in Dalmatia was also of the Orthodox faith, the Serbian government had lodged a protest against the promise of the

¹⁸ Calder, *Britain and the Origins of the New Europe* (note 5), p. 1f., 8f., 17, 46, 108, 213. Valiani, *La dissoluzione dell'Austria Ungheria* (note 2), pp. 153, 177, 200. The Foreign Office saw these Committees as a potential tactical instrument against Austria-Hungary and therefore kept them on a low flame. Nevertheless, a majority of the British diplomatic corps and even the British War Council advocated in no way the destruction of the Habsburg Monarchy, and instead pursued the option of a separate peace with Austria.

¹⁹ Valiani, *La dissoluzione dell'Austria Ungheria* (note 2), p. 151, 208f.

²⁰ Wolff, *The Western Representation of Eastern Europe* (note 9), p. 401.

²¹ *Ibid.*; Valiani, *La dissoluzione dell'Austria Ungheria* (note 2), p. 210; Hugh and Christopher Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe* (note 7), p. 153.

²² At its founding, the Committee counted fifteen members. See Marko Trogrlić, *Die Südslawische Frage als Problem der österreichisch-ungarischen und internationalen Politik*, in: Rumpler, *Die Habsburger Monarchie und der erste Weltkrieg* (note 4), p. 965-1015, here p. 1003.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 1005; Valiani, *La dissoluzione dell'Austria Ungheria* (note 2), p. 151, 235, 264. However, the British always overestimated Pašić's pro-Yugoslav sentiments. See Calder, *Britain and the Origins of the New Europe* (note 2), p. 32.

Entente to grant part of Dalmatia to Italy. Pašić was afraid, not without good reason, that the cohesiveness of the centralized Serbian kingdom could be endangered by the incorporation of millions of Catholic Croats and Slovenes, and that this could allow those parties to gain the upper hand who were calling for a federal reform and rights of self-government. Such a scenario had to be avoided at all costs.²⁴ Since the “right to self-determination” of the Southern Slav ethnicities was in no way part of its agenda when the British government decided to enter the war, opinions on this matter diverged among the ministries: Lord Cecil detested Balkan nationalism, Arthur Balfour advocated a Greater Serbia, and General Robertson as well as Lloyd George favoured the persistence of a reformed Austria-Hungary. As Kenneth Calder has rightly noted, the British government did not pursue a consistent and uniform policy when it came to the future of the Danubian Monarchy, since that had no immediate bearing on the most important war aims of the British Empire.²⁵ Depending on the particular scenario of the war, both the perpetuation and the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire were acceptable options; the decision about that matter was to be most definitely subordinated to Great Britain’s standing after the war.²⁶

Italy’s position

Italy had entered the war in May of 1915 on the side of the Entente, despite having been a long-time ally of the Central Powers.²⁷ This decision was carried by a heterogeneous alliance of parliamentary and non-parliamentary forces, some of which pursued divergent interests. The nationalists and right-wing liberals were chiefly interested in guaranteeing Italy an unassailable status as a great power, which was to be attained by gaining hegemony in the Adriatic. The

²⁴ See Valiani, *La dissoluzione dell’Austria-Ungheria* (note 2), p. 235, 258, 263f., 311, 374f, 382; Andrea Orzoff, *Battle for the Castle. The Myth of Czechoslovakia in Europe, 1914–1948* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), p. 43.

²⁵ Calder, *Britain and the Origins of the New Europe* (note 5), p. 97–101.

²⁶ We are in agreement here with the verdict of V. H. Rothwell: “The problems of nationality which so exercised a vocal minority in British public life during the war interested ruling circles as a whole only in so far as support for the ‘liberation’ of the subject peoples of eastern Europe was likely to contribute to the defeat of Germany. A break between Germany and Austria always seemed a surer means to this end and so the British preferred to encourage it whenever there seemed even a faint chance that it might be possible to bring it about.” See V. H. Rothwell, *British War Aims and Peace Diplomacy 1914–1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 285.

²⁷ See Holger Afflerbach, *Der Dreibund. Europäische Großmacht- und Allianzpolitik vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Vienna, Cologne, Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 2002). On Italy’s policy towards the Allies after the outbreak of the “July crisis” and Austria’s declaration of war against Serbia see *ibid.*, p. 813-873.

Treaty of London that was concluded in April 1915 between Italy and the Entente was supposed to ensure just that: it promised Italy the Brenner Pass as its northern border, the Austria littoral as its eastern border, and a part of Dalmatia. In addition, Italy would be given a protectorate over part of Albania, its claim to the Dodecanese islands would be affirmed, and it would be granted a sphere of influence in the Near East and a share of the distribution of the German colonies.²⁸ The democratic champions of the “Intervento,” on the other hand, men like the historian and politician Gaetano Salvemini or the patriotic socialist Leonida Bissolati, saw the war as the ultimate “war of the Risorgimento.” They were sympathetic to the idea of dismantling the Habsburg Empire, creating a federal Yugoslavia, and limiting Italy’s territorial claims exclusively to those areas where the majority of the population was Italian.²⁹ They were the ideal partners for the British Think Tank around Wickham Steed and the Yugoslav committee. The government of Prime Minister Antonio Salandra and Foreign Minister Sydney Sonnino pursued traditional power politics.³⁰ In their view of things, a weakened Austria should have continued to exist after the war. Similar positions were held at the time also by Luigi Albertini, owner and publisher of the influential Italian daily *Corriere della Sera* and a staunch interventionist.³¹ When it came to the popularity of Italy’s participation in the war, the *Corriere della Sera* played a similarly important role in Italy as *The Times* did in Great Britain. Wickham Steed, the long-time foreign editor of *The Times*, had a personal relationship with both Luigi Albertini and the Italian Foreign Minister Sydney Sonnino.³²

From the beginning, then, the group that championed the liquidation of the Habsburg Monarchy was made up of non-state actors, in which the leading role was taken by the British Think Tank, which also included the renowned archaeologist Arthur Evans and the influential

²⁸ Marina Cattaruzza, *Italy and Its Eastern Border* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 60–62.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 56; Valiani, *La dissoluzione dell’Austria Ungheria* (note 2), p. 172, 257, 264.

³⁰ Cattaruzza, *Italy and Its Eastern Border* (note 28), pp. 66–68.

³¹ Luigi Albertini, *Vent’anni di vita politica*, part 2: L’Italia nella guerra mondiale, 3 vols., vol. 2, *Dalla dichiarazione di guerra alla vigilia di Caporetto (maggio-ottobre 1917)* (Bologna: Nicola Zanichelli Editore, 1952), p. 446

³² See Cattaruzza, *Italy and Its Eastern Border* (note 28), p. 77; Albertini, *L’Italia nella guerra mondiale* (note 31), vol. 3, *Da Caporetto a Vittorio Veneto* (ottobre 1917-novembre 1918), Bologna, Nicola Zanichelli Editore, 1953, p. 253. Valiani, *La dissoluzione dell’Austria Ungheria* (note 2), p. 375. On Steed’s repeated contacts with Sonnino before and during the war, see Steed, *Through Thirty Years* (note 7), vol. 2., p. 58f., 64, 167. Still, Sonnino always rejected a pro-Yugoslav perspective and held to the London Agreement. See Marina Cattaruzza, *L’Italia e la questione adriatica* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014), p. 38f.

historians Lewis Namier and Arnold Toynbee.³³ The notion of the inescapable collapse of the Habsburg state was linked with the idea of allowing two new states to emerge on part of its territory: Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. The British network was therefore expanded, in short order, by bringing in the Czech professor Thomas Garrigue Masaryk, the Croatian-Dalmatian politicians Ante Trumbić and Franjo Supilo, as well as other supporters.³⁴ This small cadre of men represented the beginning, so to speak, of the movement toward independence by the “oppressed nationalities” of the Habsburg Empire.

Among the allies, surely neither Russia nor Serbia would have shed a tear for the Habsburg Monarchy. Still, the liquidation of this state was not among their immediate war aims. Official Serb policy, seconded by Czarist Russia, was the desire to create a Greater Serbia. The war aims of Czarist Russia, in turn, were focused primarily on controlling the straits following the foreseeable collapse of the Ottoman Empire and conquering Constantinople.³⁵

The year 1917

It would be difficult to overemphasize the importance that the events of 1917 had for the outcome of the First World War. In February, Russia was shaken by revolution and Czar Nicholas II felt compelled to abdicate the throne.³⁶ The revolutionary upheavals, whose outcome was still totally unclear in the spring, weakened the position of Serbia, which had lost an important protector in the Czar. From a military perspective, Serbia’s position was desperate: following Bulgaria’s entry into the war, the entire country was occupied by Bulgarian, German, and Austrian troops. The court, the government, the army, a majority of parliamentarians, politicians, university professors, and intellectuals, many students, but also a large number of ordinary civilians set out on an arduous trek through Albania and Montenegro

³³ Valiani, *La dissoluzione dell’Austria Ungheria* (note 2), pp. 170, 28; Calder, *Britain and the Origins of the New Europe* (note 5), p. 51f. Cattaruzza, *L’Italia e la questione adriatica* (note 32), p. 24f.

³⁴ Valiani, *La dissoluzione dell’Austria Ungheria* (note 2), pp. 151, 163, 177, 199, 200.

³⁵ See Clark, *Die Schlafwandler. Wie Europa in den Ersten Weltkrieg zog* (note 11), pp. 620–623. For a general discussion of Russia’s war aims and the Czarist Empire’s co-responsibility for the outbreak of the First World War see Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

³⁶ Manfred Hildermeier, *Die Russische Revolution 1905-1921* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1989), p.145-147.

and resettled in Corfu and Thessaloniki.³⁷ With Serbia no longer able to count on Russia's support, Pašić felt compelled to make overtures to the Yugoslav committee, and he therefore signalled Serbia's willingness to participate actively in the creation of a Yugoslav state.³⁸ The result was the Corfu Declaration of July 1917, signed by Nikola Pašić for the Serbian government and by Ante Trumbić for the Yugoslav Committee.³⁹ In it, the two rivals agreed that at the end of the war, the lands of the Habsburg Monarchy inhabited by Southern Slavs would constitute a Yugoslav state together with Serbia. The agreement envisaged a constitutional monarchy under the Karadjordjević dynasty. The rights promised to the Croats and Slovenes were reduced to a minimum: the Declaration merely stipulated that the Latin alphabet would continue to exist in the new state and that no restrictions would be imposed on the exercise of the Catholic faith. But there was no mention of rights of political autonomy or the federalization of the state.⁴⁰

Even though Serbia thus continued to act very guardedly when it came to the rights of Croats and Slovenes in the new state (which did not bode well for the future), the Corfu Declaration was a milestone on the path to the liquidation of the Habsburg Monarchy, for Serbia had now pledged itself to work toward separating the Southern Slav provinces from Austria and Hungary.

The Declaration made quite an impression on Luigi Albertini, who concluded that the creation of a Yugoslav state was now inevitable and that Italy had to redefine its war aims. From this point onward, the *Corriere della Sera* was uncompromising in promoting the view that the Habsburg Monarchy had to disappear and that Italy should support the establishment of a Yugoslav state.⁴¹

In November of 1917, two events weakened the military strength of the Entente substantially, if temporarily. First, in Russia the most radical faction of the social democrats

³⁷ Holm Sundhaussen, *Geschichte Serbiens – 19.–21. Jahrhundert* (Vienna et al., Böhlau Verlag, 2007), p. 227. A few indications of the major losses of human life caused by the hasty evacuation, the lack of resources, and the attacks by Albanian gangs can be found in Albertini, *Dalla dichiarazione di guerra alla vigilia di Caporetto (maggio 1915-ottobre 1917)* [*L'Italia nella guerra mondiale*, vol.1] (Note 31), p. 144. See also Andrej Mitrović, *Serbia's Great War 1914-1918* (London: Hurst & Company, 2007), p. 145-151.

³⁸ Sundhaussen, *Geschichte Serbiens* (note 37), p. 233.

³⁹ Valiani, *La dissoluzione dell'Austria Ungheria* (note 2), p. 311.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Albertini, *Da Caporetto a Vittorio Veneto* (note 32), p. 355–366, 375.

under the leadership of Vladimir Ulyanov Lenin came to power. The Bolsheviks immediately implemented the two most important points of their program: a redistribution of land among the peasants, and the immediate initiation of peace negotiations with the Central Powers (Decree of Peace of November 8, 1917). An armistice was signed on December 15.⁴² Revolutionary Russia entered into negotiations with Germany and its allies from an exceedingly weak position. Even *before* the Peace of Brest-Litovsk (March 1918), it was foreseeable that a German hegemony in Eastern Europe was looming.⁴³

Second, Italy, too, suffered a military disaster in November of 1917: in the Julian Alps near the small town of Caporetto (today Kobarid), Austrian and German troops were able to break through the Italian lines. Italy's Second Army proved unable to re-establish the front line. For a while the units were left without orders, since communication between the detachments and the intermediate command posts was cut. Panic spread among the Italian troops when they came under a large-scale attack with poison gas.⁴⁴ The Italian front collapsed on the third day of the battle; after a total of 72 hours, Italy's Second Army was facing annihilation. The soldiers laid down their arms and cheered for peace. An utterly demoralized army withdrew from the front. Reports speak of nearly 300,000 prisoners and 350,000 deserters and scattered forces. They were joined by about 400,000 civilians from the areas occupied by the Austro-German units. The new Italian front now ran 200 kilometres behind the original line,⁴⁵ and Italy was forced to ask Great Britain and France to send reinforcements.⁴⁶ Following the disaster of

⁴² Hildermeier, *Die Russische Revolution* (note 36), p. 255-257.

⁴³ See Rothwell, *British War Aims* (note 26), p. 143-148; 150-158, 185-197. From this point forward, the biggest concern of the British government and the British War Cabinet was that a German hegemony in Russia, with a simultaneous collapse of the Ottoman Empire, to which – ironically enough – the British themselves had contributed, could even threaten Britain's possessions in Central Asia.

⁴⁴ Manfred Rauchensteiner, *Der Erste Weltkrieg und das Ende der Habsburgermonarchie*, Wien/Köln/Weimar, 2013, pp. 816-819; Nicola Labanca, *Caporetto. Storia di una disfatta* (Florence: Giunti, 2000), p. 9-16; Pietro Melograni, *Storia politica della Grande Guerra 1915-1918* (Milan: Mondadori, 1998), p. 369f, 380.

⁴⁵ Albertini, *Da Caporetto a Vittorio Veneto* (note 32), p. 1-66. On the Italian losses of men, animals, and war material, see *ibid.*, p. 21, 28. See also Labanca, *The Italian Front* (note 1), p. 266-296, esp. p. 285-287; *ibid.*, *Caporetto. Storia di una disfatta*, (note 44), p. 36, 49; Melograni, *Storia politica della Grande Guerra* (note 44), p. 390-392.

⁴⁶ Rauchensteiner, *Der Erste Weltkrieg und das Ende der Habsburgermonarchie* (note 44), p. 819-821; Albertini, *Da Caporetto a Vittorio Veneto* (note 32), p. 37-46. The military catastrophe was the result of an almost inconceivable chain of mistakes, as a subsequent parliamentary commission of inquiry would determine: the Italian troops were concentrated on the left bank of the Isonzo, while the front line from Tolmein to Bovec, where the Austro-German breakthrough succeeded, was only thinly manned. Inexplicably, the Italian artillery was not used against the

Caporetto, voices calling for a separate peace with Austria became loud again in the Italian parliament.⁴⁷ The Catholics received backing from an appeal by Pope Benedict XV, who had addressed the political leaders of the warring states on August 1, 1917, calling upon them to end “the useless massacre.”⁴⁸ The leader of the Socialist Party, Filippo Turati, as well as other Socialist deputies, likewise argued that only immediate peace negotiations could still save the country. The former neutralist Giovanni Giolitti – Italy’s most influential politician in the pre-war years – did not take an explicit position on this question and limited himself to insisting on the unity of the country, now that portions of Italy were occupied by the enemy.⁴⁹

Signs were pointing to a peace on the basis of the status quo, or on the basis of minimal corrections to the borders. In view of the evident strength of the Central Powers, similar thoughts were being mulled over also in the British government – primarily by Lloyd George, but also by Lord Curzon and Bonar Law.⁵⁰ A separate peace with Austria, the weakest link in the enemy alliance, seemed the most reasonable option. Within the Foreign Office there were also voices who argued in favour of initiating peace negotiations with Germany too, on the basis of a return to the pre-war status quo in the West. There were even very serious considerations within the War Cabinet to allow Germany territorial acquisitions in the East.⁵¹ Lloyd George had said the following already at a cabinet meeting on September 17, 1917: “If we come to the conclusion that the Soviet was going to destroy our prospects of success, then Russia ought to pay the penalty.”⁵² The timing for a separate peace never seemed more favourable than it did

invading enemy forces. In their diaries and memoirs, even German and Austrian officers expressed their astonishment about the absence of defensive fire on the Italian side, and affirmed how much this factor had facilitated their breakthrough around Tolmein on the right bank of the Isonzo. See Albertini, *Da Caporetto a Vittorio Veneto* (note 32), p. 117f., 133–136.

⁴⁷ This was pushed chiefly by the Socialist leader Filippo Turati. See Albertini, *Da Caporetto a Vittorio Veneto* (note 32), p. 83–92. Giovanni Giolitti was in favour of concluding a compromise peace with Austria already in 1916. See Valiani, *La dissoluzione dell’Austria Ungheria* (note 2), p. 255.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 462.

⁴⁹ Albertini, *Da Caporetto a Vittorio Veneto* (note 32), p. 83–92.

⁵⁰ Rothwell, *British War Aims* (note 26), pp. 105–110.

⁵¹ Already in September of 1917, Prime Minister Lloyd George and two members of the War Cabinet as influential as Lord Curzon and Bonar Law supported the idea of demanding from Germany the return of Alsace-Lorraine to France and the restoration of Belgium and Serbia, but giving it in return a “free hand” in Russia and Romania. And this at a time when the Bolsheviks had not yet attained complete power! See *ibid.*, p. 105f. At this time, the British saw the Americans rightly as a rather insignificant factor in the warfare. See *ibid.*, p. 105f.

⁵² Calder, *Britain and the Origins of the New Europe* (note 5), p. 122.

in the late fall of 1917.⁵³ Lloyd George and the British Foreign Secretary, Balfour, took the initiative to begin an exchange with Vienna about a possible peace. As a result, talks were held in Geneva between the former Austrian ambassador to London, Alexander Count von Mensdorff, and the South African general Jan Smuts, an influential member of the British War Cabinet. However, the Austrian Foreign Minister, Ottokar Czerin, informed Berlin about the British initiative. In the end, the talks in Geneva came to nothing.⁵⁴ Austria, under the illusion that time was on its side, allowed this favourable moment to slip away. But the tide had turned again in the spring of 1918. The United States were now ready to deploy their forces on the Western Front. This shifted the balance of military power very clearly in favour of the Entente and its allies, something that was starkly revealed by the partial failure of the German spring offensive.⁵⁵ On August 8, Germany's military catastrophe on the Western Front was so obvious⁵⁶ that Ludendorff and Hindenburg urged the Emperor and his government to enter into peace negotiations with the United States – and they did so in the expectation that Wilson's Fourteen Points would still form the basis of negotiations and that Germany would continue to have a free hand in Eastern Europe. On October 3, the German Chancellor Max von Baden asked Wilson to initiate peace talks with all warring powers.

The precarious situation along the Italian front and Russia's exit from the war seemed to shatter the dreams of the Czech and Yugoslav committees and the plans of the British Think Tank. Ante Trumbić toyed with the idea of moving to Buenos Aires and make a living there as a taxi driver.⁵⁷

However, neither Wickham Steed nor Luigi Albertini were willing to simply sit back and watch their dreams being destroyed. Steed's residence in London became a meeting place for members of the Yugoslav Committee and for a group of Italian journalists, politicians, and

⁵³ This assessment is also shared by F.R. Bridge: *The Habsburg Monarchy among the Great Powers, 1815–1918* (New York, Oxford, Munich: Berg, 1990), p. 367f.

⁵⁴ Rothwell, *British War Aims* (note 26), p. 160–171; a reference to this also in Steed, *Through Thirty Years* (note 7), vol. 2., p. 217.

⁵⁵ On this see Rauchensteiner, *Das Ende der Habsburgermonarchie* (note 44), p. 958; Schaffer, *USA* (note 3), p. 110–112.

⁵⁶ However, until the beginning of September, British troops were not able to reoccupy the territory that the Germans had taken in the course of the offensive. See Cornwall, *The Undermining of Austria-Hungary* (note 3), p. 422.

⁵⁷ Steed, *Through Thirty Years* (note 7), vol. 2., p. 166.

deputies committed to the goal of reaching an agreement between the Italians and the Yugoslavs (*recte* Croats) when it came to the division of Austrian territories along the Adriatic Sea.⁵⁸ Within this circle, Antonio Borgese⁵⁹, a journalist of the *Corriere della Sera*, floated the idea of summoning a congress of the “oppressed nationalities” in Rome.⁶⁰ Two important agreements were reached in the run-up to the congress: 1) Ante Trumbić and the Italian parliamentarian Andrea Torre agreed that Italy would let go of Dalmatia in return for the recognition, by the Yugoslav side, of its claims to Trieste and the northern coast of the Adriatic Sea;⁶¹ 2) the new Italian Prime Minister Vittorio Emanuele Orlando was also brought into the British-Italian-Yugoslav plans. On January 26, Orlando had a “very friendly” meeting with Ante Trumbić in London.⁶² Following that meeting, he promised the official support of the Italian government for a congress of the “oppressed nationalities.”⁶³ Alongside Serbia, a second allied of the Entente had thus been won for the destruction of the Habsburg Monarchy: the quasi-great power Italy.⁶⁴

The Congress of Oppressed Nationalities convened in Rome on April 8, 1918. The participants included representatives of the Croat, Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, Romanians, and Serbs. All Entente powers and the American ambassador to Rome also sent representatives.⁶⁵ Vittorio Emanuele Orlando received the Yugoslav delegation first, followed by all the others.⁶⁶ The Congress dealt the fatal blow to the Habsburg Monarchy. It ended with a declaration that granted the right of full political and economic independence to all nationalities that were wholly or partly subject to the Habsburg monarchy. The “oppressed nationalities” promised to

⁵⁸ Valiani, *La dissoluzione dell’Austria Ungheria* (note 2), p. 380f. It is noteworthy that Pašić showed no enthusiasm for such contacts. See *ibid.*, p. 398f. Steed, *Through Thirty Years* (note 7), vol.2., p. 168; Albertini, *Da Caporetto a Vittorio Veneto* (Note 7), p. 253; Hugh and Christopher Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe* (Note 7), pp. 239–241.

⁵⁹ On Antonio Borgese see Leoncini, *Alternativa mazziniana*, p.103f.

⁶⁰ Albertini, *Da Caporetto a Vittorio Veneto* (note 32), p. 266; Valiani, *La dissoluzione dell’Austria Ungheria* (note 2), p. 385.

⁶¹ Albertini, *Da Caporetto a Vittorio Veneto* (note 32), p. 265–269; Valiani, *La dissoluzione dell’Austria Ungheria* (note 2), p. 392.

⁶² Valiani, *La dissoluzione dell’Austria Ungheria* (note 2), p. 384.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ On the decisive contribution of the Italian support to the success of the demands by the exile committee, see Cattaruzza, *L’Italia e la questione adriatica* (note 32), p. 192f.

⁶⁵ Albertini, *Da Caporetto a Vittorio Veneto* (note 32), p. 270–278.

⁶⁶ Albertini, *Da Caporetto a Vittorio Veneto* (note 32), p. 272; Valiani, *La dissoluzione dell’ Austria Ungheria* (note 2), p. 394; Leoncini, *Alternativa mazziniana*, p.150-152.

support one another in achieving these goals, and declared that political self-determination was the shared interest of all. In addition, all parties to the Congress pledged to respect the cultural rights of all minorities and to settle all potential disagreements peacefully and amicably.⁶⁷

Two developments now also convinced the British Prime Minister, Lloyd George, and the American President, Woodrow Wilson, to support the efforts toward independence by the national groups at the expense of the Habsburg state: the stop of the German western offensive at the beginning of April;⁶⁸ and, almost simultaneously, the eruption of the so-called “Sixtus Affair,” in the wake of which some careless statements by Austria’s Foreign Minister Czernin revealed the existence of secret peace overtures by Emperor Charles to France in the previous year.⁶⁹ As a result of these revelations, Austria found itself de facto in a dependent relationship vis-à-vis Germany.⁷⁰ Now there was no longer any reason also for Lloyd George to treat the Habsburg Monarchy any differently than the German Empire. A final attempt by the Austrian army to break through the Italian front along the Piave River failed not least because the supply situation of the Austrian troops was dismal.⁷¹

The following months down to November 1918 were then nothing more than an epilogue. The recognition of the “Czechoslovak Legion” as the national army of Czechoslovakia

⁶⁷ Hugh and Christopher Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe* (note 7), p. 261–265; Francesco Leoncini, ed., *Tra Grande Guerra e Nuova Europa. Il Patto di Roma e la Legione Ceco-Slovacca* (Treviso: Kellermann, 2014), p. 52f.; Leoncini, *Alternativa mazziniana*, p. 149f.

⁶⁸ On July 18, 1918, the offensive of the French general Foch ended the German attempts at a breakthrough. See Steed, *Through Thirty Years* (note 7, vol. 2, p. 220).

⁶⁹ Robert A. Kann, *Die Sixtusaffäre und die geheimen Friedensverhandlungen Österreich-Ungarns im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Vienna, 1966); Lothar Höbelt, „Stehen oder Fallen?“ *Österreichische Politik im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Wien/Köln/Weimar, 2015, p. 229–236; Albertini, *Da Caporetto a Vittorio Veneto* (note 32), p. 226–230.

⁷⁰ Albertini, *Da Caporetto a Vittorio Veneto* (note 32), p. 231f. After the letter from Emperor Charles to Poincaré, in which the Austrian monarch had spoken in favour of a return of Alsace-Lorraine to France, had been made public by Clemenceau, Charles was forced to undertake a “walk to Canossa”: on May 12, 1918, he visited Wilhelm II at the German headquarters in Spa. There he committed himself henceforth to act only in accord with Germany. According to Höbelt, this relationship of dependency was more appearance than reality and did not translate into any meaningful joint military action. See Höbelt, „Stehen oder Fallen?“ *Österreichische Politik im Ersten Weltkrieg* (note 68), p. 235f. However, Charles’ visit to Spa led to a clear change in the way the Entente perceived Austria.

⁷¹ Albertini, *Da Caporetto a Vittorio Veneto* (note 32), p. 311–319; Valiani, *La dissoluzione dell’Austria Ungheria* (note 2), p. 407; Maureen Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I*, Cambridge 2004, p. 306; Cornwall, *The Undermining of Austria-Hungary* (note 3), p. 406f. According to Cornwall, the Austrian army never recovered from the profound disappointment over the failed breakthrough along the Piave.

played a crucial role in the downfall of the Habsburg Monarchy.⁷² The Legion was made up of Czech and (a few) Slovak prisoners of war. They were placed under the command of the Czech National Council, which had emerged from the former Czech Committee.⁷³ Hereby, the basic structures of the new state had already been created in embryonic form. The Czech Legion was recognized as the national army by France on June 29, by Great Britain on August 9 and finally by the United States on September 3.⁷⁴ On September 26, the Italian Foreign Minister, Sydney Sonnino, recognized the Czechoslovak government as the legitimate representative of an independent Czechoslovakia.⁷⁵ On October 18, the American Secretary of State, Robert Lansing, conveyed to the Austrian Emperor his government's response to Austria's request that peace negotiations be initiated: Wilson's fourteen Points from January 18 were no longer relevant, since the American government had by now recognized Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia as sovereign states.⁷⁶

Conclusion

Only in recent years has historiography begun to question the firm conviction that the Habsburg Monarchy had been doomed to fall because of the unresolved issue of the nationalities. Within this "framing," the First World War merely took on the function of having accelerated a predetermined course.⁷⁷ By contrast, newer interpretations posit that it was the famine and increasingly dismal supply situation among the civilian population from the winter of 1917 onward that dealt the death blow to the Habsburg Monarchy.⁷⁸ This circumstance, so

⁷² On the propagandistic function of the Czechoslovak legion for the creation of an independent Czechoslovakia, see Orzoff, *Battle for the Castle* (note 24), -p. 47–49. See also Leoncini, *Tra Grande Guerra e Nuova Europa. Il Patto di Roma e la Legione Ceco-Slovacca* (note 66), p. 66.

⁷³ The transformation had already taken place in the spring of 1916. See Valiani, *La dissoluzione dell'Austria Ungheria* (note 2), p. 211.

⁷⁴ Valiani, *La dissoluzione dell'Austria Ungheria* (note 2), p. 399; Calder, *Britain and the Origins of the New Europe* (note 5), p. 209–211; Ivan Šedivý, *Der Einfluss des Ersten Weltkrieges auf die tschechische Politik*, in: Rumpler, *Vom Vielvölkerstaat Österreich-Ungarn zum neuen Europa der Nationalstaaten* (note 4), p. 732–734.

⁷⁵ Albertini, *Da Caporetto a Vittorio Veneto* (note 32), p. 415.

⁷⁶ Rauchensteiner, *Das Ende der Habsburgermonarchie* (note 44), p. 1034; Valiani, *La dissoluzione dell'Austria Ungheria* (note 2), p. 399.

⁷⁷ Lothar Höbelt continues to propound this thesis: „*Stehen oder Fallen?*“ *Österreichische Politik im Ersten Weltkrieg* (note 68), p. 239.

⁷⁸ The thesis that the aggravated famine was the chief cause behind the dissolution of the Habsburg state is advocated above all by Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World*

the argument goes, abrogated the pact between the citizens and a state that had proved incapable of guaranteeing the most elementary needs of its population, to the point of simple survival (in the sense of a revised Hobbesian contract).

In the present essay, I have tried to open up a new perspective on this thematic complex by framing my argument more forcefully than has been done hitherto in situational rather than teleological terms. Compared to the precedent time of peace, the outbreak of the war greatly expanded the horizon of what seemed “attainable”. And the room to manoeuvre also increased for the actors and the historical “agencies”: in the face of the international polarization brought on by the war, self-proclaimed committees could present themselves as the legitimate representatives of the will of their own oppressed nations. Depending on the situation, this claim was taken more or less seriously by the political establishment of the warring powers. When the national committees were set up, their program was supported only by the British Think Tank around Wickham Steed and Robert Seton Watson. Afterwards, Serbia, Italy,⁷⁹ France, Great Britain, and the United States embraced the notion of national self-determination for the “oppressed nationalities” of the Habsburg Monarchy. It would be hard to overemphasize the role that Luigi Albertini, the journalists of the *Corriere dell Sera*, and the Italian Prime Minister Vittorio Emanuele Orlando played in this development. The convening of the Congress of Oppressed Nationalities in Rome constituted a high point in the process of reorganizing Central Eastern Europe on the basis of newly defined national criteria. The military defeat of the Habsburg Monarchy between the end of October and the beginning of November 1918 led to its dissolution because the alternative(s) to its persistence had been prepared well in advance, and had been able to command majorities, beginning in the spring of 1918, in the

War I (note 70). See also Gary B. Cohen, “Our Laws, Our Taxes, and Our Administration. Citizenship in Imperial Austria,” in Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz, eds., *Shatterzone of Empires. Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian and Ottoman Borderlands* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013), p. 103-121, esp. p. 117. Pieter Judson also assigns to the desperate supply situation an essential role in the collapse. As further causes he mentions the harsh governmental repression, the diffuse mistrust, and the bullying behaviour of the authorities towards the citizens. See Pieter M. Judson, “Where our commonality is necessary...”: Rethinking the End of the Habsburg Monarchy [Thirty-Second Annual Robert A. Kann Memorial Lecture],” in *Austrian History Yearbook*, No. 48, 2017, pp. 1–21, esp. p. 13–17. For John Deak, it was the abrupt, war-induced interruption of Austria’s development into a modern welfare state that tarnished the relationship between the state institutions and the citizens. See Deak, *The Great War and the Forgotten Realm* (note 7), esp. pp. 365–379.

⁷⁹ On the growing support for the destruction of Austria-Hungary on the part of the Italian high command after the disaster of Caporetto, see Steed, *Through Thirty Years* (note 7), vol. 2., p. 204.

war cabinets and among the responsible politicians and expert committees of the Western powers. This thesis does not in any way deny the state of crisis within the Danubian Monarchy and the erosion of solidarity among the civilian population – developments which have been impressively described above all by Maureen Healy. The way in which the burdens of scarcity were distributed was felt to be (and was in fact) inequitable, and this led to a growing hostility between Austrians and Hungarians, the bourgeoisie and the farmers, city-dwellers and country people: the result was a fraying of the social bonds and a chaotic fragmentation of society into its social and ethnic components.⁸⁰ But these circumstances, by themselves, were not a sufficient reason why the Habsburg Monarchy should implode as a state in the wake of the defeat in the war, and why Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia – both with a significant amount of Hungarian territory - should arise from its ruins. From a contrafactual perspective, the crisis of Austria-Hungary could also have given rise to a revolution and a radical transformation of the state structure as was the case in Germany. Rather, the monarchy collapsed because the alternative to its perpetuation was already in place as a workable prefiguration. The crucial stages leading to this constellation were the Corfu Declaration, the gradual recognition of the Czech Legion as an independent army by the Entente, and, last but not least, the Congress of Oppressed Nationalities in Rome along with the decisions that were made there. These formed the building blocks of the state entities that eventually replaced the Habsburg Monarchy. But they proved themselves pretty ephemeral and, in turn, no longer exist today in their original form.

⁸⁰ Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire* (note 70), esp. pp. 31–86, 300–313.