

TIBOR GLANT

THE ROLE OF CALVINISM IN PRESIDENT WILSON'S  
RELATIONSHIP TO HUNGARY DURING  
WORLD WAR I.<sup>1</sup>

With a large number of contradictory interpretations of his personality and policies and with many American historians jealously guarding his image as the New World's last moral idealist, Thomas Woodrow Wilson remains difficult to understand.<sup>2</sup> What all accounts of Wilson's life and policies share, though, is the emphasis on his Calvinism. Wilson's stern belief in his own chosenness reinforced his belief in America being a model for the rest of the world, and the two together came to be the guiding principles of his wartime policies.

---

<sup>1</sup> The following essay is a revised version of the author's lecture at the 28th Duquesne History Forum, held in Pittsburgh, 20–22 October 1994. The author would like to express his gratitude to Prof. Peter Pastor of Montclair State University, MD, for his useful comments on the paper, and Prof. Steven Béla Várdy and the Rev. Aladár Komjáthy, both of Duquesne University, for the invitation to the conference.

<sup>2</sup> Literally, hundreds of books have been written about Wilson. To name but a few of the most important ones: William E. Dodd, *Woodrow Wilson and His Work*. (New York, 1920); August Heckscher, *Woodrow Wilson. A Biography*. (New York, 1991); Thomas J. Knock, *The War to End All Wars. Woodrow Wilson and the Search for a New World Order*. (New York and Oxford, 1992); Norman Gordon Levin, *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics. America's Response to War and Revolution*. (New York, 1968); Arthur Stanley Link, *Wilson*. 5 vols. (Princeton, 1947–65); Arthur Walworth, *Woodrow Wilson*. 2 vols. (New York, 1958).

During the World War Wilson tried to act as the bringer of peace first as mediator then through military intervention. When in April 1917 he defined the global conflict as a struggle between the forces of good and evil and asked Congress to declare war on Germany it became clear that he was ready and willing to lead his country even into an armed conflict to establish the US as *primus inter pares* in a new world order.

That Calvinism played an all-important role in shaping Wilson's moral universe and foreign policies—the American historian Arthur Stanley Link defined the latter as 'missionary diplomacy'<sup>3</sup>—must be attributed to the influence of his father, the Presbyterian Minister Joseph Ruggles Wilson. Although the subject of a sometimes overheated debate, this father-son relationship, as well as Wilson's childhood inhibitions and failures, are generally understood to have shaped his unshakable belief in his own chosenness.<sup>4</sup>

In sharp contrast with the extensive coverage of Wilson's Calvinism, his Hungarian policies, especially before and during the World War, have largely been neglected by historians. Subsequently, such assessments are based upon speculation<sup>5</sup> and have yielded two strange misconceptions. First, Wilson's 1912 statement that he was an expert on Austro-Hungarian affairs has been taken for granted and echoed by many historians without reservation. Second, due to Wilson's role in the dismemberment of Hungary during 1918—1919 he has been accused of anti-Hungarian sentiments. Neither of these

---

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Stanley Link, *Wilson, the Diplomatist. A Look at His Major Foreign Policies*. (Baltimore, 1957) is centered around this theme.

<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud and William Christian Bullitt, *Woodrow Wilson, Twenty-eighth President of the United States. A Psychological Study*. (Cambridge, MA, 1966); Alexander L. and Juliette L. George, *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House. A Personality Study*. (New York, 1956); Edwin A. Weinstein, *Woodrow Wilson: A Medical and Psychological Biography*. (Princeton, 1981).

<sup>5</sup> These are mostly studies of the dismemberment of the Habsburg Empire. See for example: Fejtő Ferenc, *Rekviem egy hajdanvolt birodalomért. Ausztria-Magyarország szétrombolása*. (Budapest, 1990); Leo Valiani, *The End of Austria-Hungary*. (London, 1973); Arthur J. May, *The Passing of the Hapsburg Monarchy*. 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1966).

arguments actually holds water and before progressing to the details of Wilson's Hungarian connections these issues need to be clarified.

Wilson's academic writings and his wartime utterances and policies hardly prove his expertise in (Austro-) Hungarian matters. True, in four of his academic writings he addressed the problems of the Monarchy and Hungary but his output is far from convincing. His first such piece was an early essay on Bismarck in which he did not even mention Hungary and dealt with the Habsburg Empire only superficially.<sup>6</sup> Written in 1889, *The State*, Wilson's next piece discussing the Monarchy, is considered to be one of the highlights of his academic career. It is a lengthy exposition on the theory and practice of the state during human history; and it was within this frame of reference that the would-be President discussed Austria-Hungary and offered an—especially by contemporary American standards—impressive account of the dualist system. That he paid little if any attention to detail was manifested in his rather strange interpretation of the 'rule of the Magyar gentry' in the separate sub-section on Hungary. That notwithstanding, this fifteen-page section in *The State* remains Wilson's longest, best and most quoted piece on (Austria-) Hungary.<sup>7</sup> In 1908 in *Constitutional Government in the United States* Wilson compared the Magna Carta of England and the Golden Bull of Hungary in a way which makes one feel that he should have left the question alone:

For all she made a similar beginning, Hungary did not obtain constitutional government, and England did. Undoubtedly the chief reason was that the nobles of Hungary contended for the privileges of a class, while the barons of England contended for the privileges of a nation, and that the Englishmen were not seeking to set up any new law or privilege, but to recover and reestablish what they already had and feared they should

---

<sup>6</sup> "Prince Bismarck" in: Arthur Stanley Link, et al., eds., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*. 66 vols. (Princeton, 1966—94) 1: 307—14. (Hereafter: *WWPs*).

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Woodrow Wilson, *The State. Elements of Historical and Practical Politics*. rev. ed. (Boston, 1904): 334—48. (Hereafter: Wilson, *The State*).

lose. Another and hardly less significant reason was that the Englishmen provided machinery for the maintenance of the agreement, and the Magyars did not.<sup>8</sup>

This quote does speak volumes but not of Wilson's expertise in the field but of his unconcealed WASP superiority complex; which would reappear in a strikingly similar public statement during the 1912 election campaign.<sup>9</sup> The future President's fourth academic reference to Hungary also fails to show him as an expert. In the fifth and final volume of his *A History of the American People* (1902) he revealed his views about Hungarian, Polish and Italian immigrants with a then typical arrogance towards New Immigrants, which earned him a lot of trouble in 1912. According to Wilson, after 1890:

there came multitudes of men of the lowest class from the south of Italy and men of the meaner sort out of Hungary and Poland, men out of the ranks where there was neither skill nor energy nor any initiative of quick intelligence; and they came in numbers which increased from year to year, as if the countries of the south of Europe were disburdening themselves of the more sordid and hapless elements of their population, the men whose standards of life and work were such as American workmen had never dreamed of hitherto.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Woodrow Wilson, *Constitutional Government in the United States*. (New York, 1908. Reprint: New York, 1961): 6.

<sup>9</sup> In the opening address of his Connecticut state campaign, on 25 September 1912, Wilson stated: "Why, in that ancient Kingdom of Hungary, for example, contemporary with the great Magna Carta, to which we look back as the source of our constitutional liberties, there was proclaimed upon a notable day the terms of the Great Golden Bull which ran almost in the identical terms of the Magna Carta. But Hungary never could get a foothold for the execution of those principles until she began to send eager multitudes across the ocean to find in America what they had vainly hoped for in Hungary." (*WWPs* 25: 256).

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Woodrow Wilson, *A History of the American People*. 5 vols. (New York, 1902): 5: 212—13.

The evaluation of this statement takes our discussion into the realm of the other misconception regarding Wilson's attitudes towards Hungary: his supposed anti-Hungarianism. This myth has sprung from no less than three different sources. First, from the disillusionment of the then contemporary political elite of Hungary with Wilson's withdrawal of Point Ten of the Fourteen Points. Second, from the Rev. László Harsányi, a New York Reformed Minister, who during his 1920 visit to Hungary began to spread the story that Wilson had actually gotten fed up with the Hungarians during the early 1900s when he served as the notary of New Brunswick and witnessed the rather shocking debates of the representatives of Hungarian-American Reformed Churches. Third, from Wilson's condemnatory statement regarding the Hungarian-Americans, which has been cited earlier. The first of these 'sources' is based upon a misunderstanding of Wilson's East Central European diplomacy or, rather, the Hungarians' unwillingness to accept his decision regarding the cancellation of Point Ten. The second 'source', Harsányi's striking claim, has been refuted by the late Aladár Komjáthy, the host of our workshop, who demonstrated that the New York Minister was interpreting rather freely Wilson's motivations and career.<sup>11</sup> Wilson's view of the Hungarian-Americans, commonly known as the 'hunkies', is by far the most interesting element of this puzzle not only because it was used against him in 1912 but also because it sheds more light upon his overall attitudes towards Hungary.

Interestingly, Wilson's dislike of the 'hunkies' or, rather, of the troublesome elements among them, did not go hand in hand with a general dislike of Hungary. To the contrary, through his father he actually picked up the Republican-Protestant image of Hungary, which was cleverly created by Kossuth during his successful 1851—52 visit to the New World. Wilson wrote in *The State*:

---

<sup>11</sup> Komjáthy Aladár, *A kitántorgott egyház*. (Budapest, 1984): 171—72. (Hereafter: Komjáthy, *Kitántorgott*).

Dominant in a larger country than Bohemia, perhaps politically more capable than any Slavonic people, and certainly more enduring and definite in their purposes, the Magyars, though crushed by superior force in the field of battle, have been able to win a specially recognized and highly favored place in the dual monarchy. Although for a long time a land in which the noble was the only citizen, Hungary has been a land of political liberties almost as long as England herself has been.<sup>12</sup>

Wilson's adherence to the romanticized concept of a freedom-loving and chivalrous people was thus based upon a religious twist, which actually worked in favor of Hungary. It is easy to see that by the beginning of the twentieth century Hungary was neither Protestant nor democratic or republican. Everyday contacts in the New World and minor diplomatic crises, such as the arrest of the American Government agent Marcus Braun in Budapest in 1905,<sup>13</sup> apparently did not impress the American public, which did not bother to review its concept of Hungary the way the British and the French did. This was a token of neither sympathy nor dislike but of an underlying lack of interest in the affairs of Hungary on the part of the Americans. The very same attitude seemed to characterize the writings as well as the political conduct of Woodrow Wilson both as an academic and as Chief Executive of the United States of America. Having thus established the real sources and nature of his attitudes towards Hungary it is now time to offer a brief assessment of Wilson's Hungarian contacts and policies between January 1912 and November 1918.

Wilson's Hungarian-American contacts in 1912 provided an extra dimension for the presidential election campaign in a peculiar way. The

---

<sup>12</sup> Wilson, *The State*: 335—36.

<sup>13</sup> A detailed introduction of this episode would extend beyond the scope of the present study. Suffice it to say that Braun was released after President Roosevelt's intervention on his behalf. Marcus Braun, *Immigration Abuses*. (New York, 1906. Reprint: San Francisco, 1972).

American press magnate William R. Hurst decided to back Champ Clark in the Primaries against Wilson and it was the Hurst papers, and not the immigrants, who picked out Wilson's earlier cited rather unfortunate remarks about Italian, Polish and Hungarians newcomers. In the crossfire of the attacks from the Hurst papers and the innumerable requests by immigrants to withdraw his condemnatory remarks,<sup>14</sup> on 22 July 1912 Wilson finally issued the following press statement to the Hungarian-American journalist Géza Kende of the *Amerikai Magyar Népszava*:

I believe in the reasonable restriction of immigration but not in any restriction which will exclude from the country honest and industrious peoples who are seeking what America has always offered, an asylum for those who seek a free field. The whole question is a very difficult one but, I think can be solved with justice and generosity. Any one who has the least knowledge of Hungarian history must feel that stock to have proved itself fit for liberty and opportunity.<sup>15</sup>

This statement would have settled the issue had Wilson not demonstrated his WASP superiority complex yet again in the September campaign address, which is cited in note 9. Nonetheless, Wilson's eventual victory in the election proved the effectiveness of his campaign manager, Frank McCombs, who later refused to be 'sent to darkest Austria' as ambassador,<sup>16</sup> and the fact that domestic reform (the New Freedom) was the main issue at stake.

Testifying to good political insight and excellent tactical skills, Wilson sought no revenge upon those involved in the campaign against

---

<sup>14</sup> This aspect of the 1912 election campaign has largely been neglected. For discussion and the relevant documents see: Arthur Stanley Link, *Wilson: The Road to the White House*. (Princeton, 1947): 380—90; WWPs 24: 226, 241—43, 269—70, 404—07, 548—49.

<sup>15</sup> See the 23 July 1912 issue of the paper. *The New York Times* also covered the story on the very same day.

<sup>16</sup> WWPs 25: 614, and 27: 127.

him; moreover, he maintained good connections with the few Hungarian-Americans who sided with him during 1912. One such person was the rather mysterious Edmund Gallauner, who was called upon in 1916 to provide similar services in Wilson's campaign for reelection.<sup>17</sup> An even more significant personal connection for Wilson was the New York banker Alexander Konta, arguably the most controversial Hungarian-American figure of the entire war period. Their relationship may hardly be described as friendship; one may say instead that in Konta Wilson had a prominent Hungarian-American whom he could, and willingly did, use if needed. Their post-1912 connections, therefore, deserve special attention.

1916 saw the reestablishment of the Wilson-Konta contacts over the issue of Hungarian-American loyalties to the United States. Due to their involvement in sabotage, which also contributed to the forced withdrawal of the Austro-Hungarian Ambassador to Washington, Constantin Theodore Dumba,<sup>18</sup> Hungarian-Americans had to face violent discrimination. Their natural reaction was a public demonstration of their loyalty to their new home country on 30 January 1916; and their resolution was handed over to Wilson by Konta in the White House.<sup>19</sup> Other Hungarian-Americans, however, such as the editors of the all-powerful *Szabadság* of Cleveland, considered this move unnecessary and condemned Konta's action as offering the Hungarian-American vote to the President.<sup>20</sup> Thus, at a time when Konta reentered the limelight in the White House his position was undermined in immigrant circles by the attacks in the press.

---

<sup>17</sup> Library of Congress: Thomas Woodrow Wilson Papers: Series 4: Case Files: no. 5080: Edmund Gallauner. (Hereafter: LC TWWP).

<sup>18</sup> For Dumba's own account see: Constantin Theodore Dumba, *Memoirs of a Diplomat*. (London, 1933).

<sup>19</sup> LC TWWP: Series 4: Case Files: No. 2898: Alexander Konta; WWP 36: 205; Puskás Julianna, *Kivándorló magyarok az Egyesült Államokban, 1880—1940*. (Budapest, 1982): 303—15.

<sup>20</sup> In the 29 February 1916 issue of the paper.

The other Konta-Wilson encounter, the longest and final one, began in November 1917 and ended sometime during the early summer of 1918. First privately, in November 1917, then publicly as the head of the American-Hungarian Loyalty League, which was established under the auspices of Wilson's own propaganda agency, the Committee on Public Information, Konta accused the Hungarian-American Reformed Churches of spying and sabotaging Americanization. Search warrants were issued and carried out but no definitive evidence was found, which led to Konta's removal from government circles once and for all.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, in order to silence the rather heated debate in Hungarian-American circles, Wilson granted a brief audience to a delegation of Reformed Ministers on 8 July 1918.<sup>22</sup> This event, which happened to be Wilson's last direct Hungarian-American contact during the war, may be interpreted in two different ways. It has been argued that this was a clearcut demonstration of the fact that Konta's accusations had been unfounded.<sup>23</sup> An alternative explanation would be that Wilson, although aware of the intentions and activities of the Hungarian-American Reformed Churches, decided to close his eyes and create a domestic consensus to secure support for his foreign policies.

As for such policies, Wilson proved to be a conservative reformer, at least in the Habsburg case. He publicly voiced his dislike of the nature of Habsburg rule in the Monarchy as early as December 1914,<sup>24</sup> but refused to join the dismemberment camp until the summer of 1918. In fact, he even refused to meet separatist politicians from the Habsburg Empire until well after the American declaration of war on

---

<sup>21</sup> *WWPs* 45: 135—40; Komjáthy, *Kitántorgott*: 141—42.

<sup>22</sup> *Szabadság*, 9 July 1918. Edmund (Ödön) Vasváry was among them.

<sup>23</sup> Komjáthy, *Kitántorgott*: 144.

<sup>24</sup> In an interview with Henry Bruce Brougham of *The New York Times* Wilson contended: "Austria-Hungary will go to pieces altogether—ought to go to pieces for the welfare of Europe." (*WWPs* 31: 459).

the Dual Monarchy.<sup>25</sup> The guiding principle of Wilson's East Central European policy until the summer of 1918 was the removal of Austria-Hungary from the war preferably by a separate peace. Only when it became clear that this policy would not work did Wilson decide to go for the more radical option: dismemberment.<sup>26</sup> Yet, even after casting his vote for the independence of the Czechs and the South Slavs, the American President sought to establish some sort of regional integration in the Danubian Basin; and this remained the chief concern for his task force for peace preparations, the Inquiry. Interestingly, Wilson refused to consider the alternative to full dismemberment, the removal of Austria-Hungary from the war through the separation of Hungary from Austria.

Actually, the stage for such a move was set by Tisza's mid-1917 removal and his widely cited assessment of the situation: 'this is nothing short of revolution'.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile in December 1917, Fiorello LaGuardia, the future Mayor of New York City then serving in the US Signal Corps in Italy, proposed direct undercover action in support of Károlyi, which Wilson rejected on moral grounds.<sup>28</sup> Wilson's categorical refusal, however, was not the outcome of careful consideration: with the reports of the State Department and of Military and Naval Intelligence casting no light upon the situation in Hungary,<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> It is common knowledge that Masaryk was the first such politician whom Wilson saw, in mid-June, 1918.

<sup>26</sup> Wilson's wartime utterances as well as the memoirs of Robert Lansing, his second Secretary of State all testify to that. See also: Frank P. Chambers, *The War Behind the War, 1914—1918. A History of the Political and Civilian Fronts*. (London, 1939); Victor S. Mamatey, *The United States and East-Central Europe, 1914—1918. A Study in Wilsonian Diplomacy and Propaganda*. (Princeton, 1957).

<sup>27</sup> Apparently first cited in the 16 June 1917 issue of *The New Republic*.

<sup>28</sup> National Archives, Washington, D.C.: Record Group 59: Decimal Files of the Department of State: M 708: reel 3: Thomas Nelson Page to Lansing, 29 December 1917; Wilson to Lansing, 1 January 1918.

<sup>29</sup> This statement is based upon an extensive reading of the relevant State Department and Intelligence files in the National Archives.

Wilson could not have realized that such a move would have been doomed to failure. Simply, he was reluctant to take such a drastic step as early as the turn of 1917—18. On top of that, Wilson developed serious reservations about Károlyi, who had toured the United States in the company of ‘socialists’ (Kunfi, etc.) in 1914.<sup>30</sup> While Károlyi enjoyed a surprisingly strong support in the American press Wilson continued to disregard him during 1917 considering the Hungarian aristocrat to be politically weightless. Károlyi was also unacceptable for personal reasons; namely because he was reportedly in regular contact with the Hungarian feminist Rosika Bédy-Schwimmer, who due to an act of indiscretion back in September 1914, was considered *persona non grata* in the Wilson White House.<sup>31</sup>

On the strength of the above considerations one may say that Wilson did not develop a coherent Hungarian policy during the World War, nor was he by any means hostile towards the lesser half of the lesser Central Power. Wilson represented the then typical American romanticizing attitude towards Hungary, which he abandoned for personal reasons (Károlyi, Bédy-Schwimmer) and due to unforeseen changes in global high politics during the early summer of 1918. His sympathy for Kossuth’s Protestant-Republican Hungary of some 70 years before was gradually replaced by a new set of preferences, especially Czech orientation, which later guided his conduct in East Central European affairs at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919.

---

<sup>30</sup> Gróf Károlyi Mihály, *Hít, illúziók nélkül*. (Budapest, 1977): 62—63. Konta tried in vain to fix an interview for Károlyi with Wilson through McCombs: WWPp 29: 404, 407.

<sup>31</sup> Barbara S. Kraft, *The Peace Ship. Henry Ford’s Pacifist Adventure in the First World War*. (New York and London, 1978): 10—11. Later in 1918 Károlyi appointed Bédy-Schwimmer to Berne and the Americans forced her withdrawal; see: Peter Pastor, The Diplomatic Fiasco of the Modern World’s First Woman Ambassador, Rosa Bédy-Schwimmer. in: *East European Quarterly*, vol. 8 no. 3 (1975): 273—82.