"Comfortable disinterestedness": How the United States Looked at Hungary during World War I

Glant, Tibor. *Kettős tükörben: Magyarország helye az amerikai közvéleményben és külpolitikában az első világháború idején.* [*Through a Double Prism: Hungary's Place in American Public Opinion and Diplomacy during World War I*] Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, 2008. 307 pp.

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Some things never change. 90 years after the Treaty of Trianon the trauma it caused still lives on and may be seen as the seed of animosity and new confrontations among the countries living in the Central European area. Since post-Trianon Hungary has been the subject of most scholarly work in recent years, it is all the more important to learn about the historic period prior to it, so that we might gain some further perspective on issues involved. Gaining added knowledge about World War I can bring us to a closer understanding of Trianon as well. Tibor Glant's book, as he formulates it in the foreword, wishes to "dismantle myths," of which there are quite a few. (23) His work, based on twenty years of research, deals with one of the outright distorted versions of socialist history in Hungary after World War II: the relations between Hungary and the United States during World War I. His purpose with the extended Hungarian version of his book is to fill the vacuum that exists between the documented history and the analyses of relations of the two countries.[1]

[1] The original of the book came out ten years before the Hungarian version. Tibor Glant. *Through the Prism of the Habsburg Monarchy: Hungary in American Diplomacy and Public Opinion During the First World War* (Social Science Monographs: War and Society in East Central Europe vol. XXXVI. Highland Lakes, NJ: Atlantic Studies on Society in Change, Atlantic Research and Publications Inc., 1998. xx + 372 p.)

The social upheavals in Hungary following the armistice in the fall of 1918 and the infamous Treaty of Trianon of 1920 have served as the usual focal point for studies on relations between the two countries, of which Hungary did not exist as a single entity up until the conclusion of the World War. But the antecedents are just as important. The book deals with a score of prominent figures, including not only the usual suspects such as Woodrow Wilson, Colonel House, George Creel, Count Albert Apponyi (Glant's favorite Hungarian politician of the period), or Mihály Károlyi, but some lesser known persons that make the picture a whole, including Alexander (Sándor) Konta, Róza Bédy-Schwimmer, Jenő Bagger-Szekeres, or Mór Cukor. Through these people the author amply illustrates the importance of personality in diplomacy.

In the beginning of the book he summarizes the history of the views the two nations held about the other on the eve of the war: Americans thought of Hungarians as the land of hussars and nobles with a conspicuous vein of romanticism, and also as the land of Kossuth: whereas Hungarians held the view that the United States was the land of (economic) opportunity. As the author sums up, the four main factors in shaping the view about Hungarians were "the Kossuth myth, contemporary Hungarian politics, the American view of the immigrants, and the opinions of those Americans who had been to Hungary," but "romantic stereotypes" defined these views, which Glant calls "comfortable disinterestedness." (55, 58, 59) One of the main strengths of this (and other) chapters is the depth of sources provided about the emerging subjects, a trait that can be seen in Glant's other works as well.

The chapter called "Diplomacy" casts an important light on the issue of relations. Up to the very last weeks of the war, there were no explicit American-Hungarian affairs, and not much afterward either. This should come as no surprise, since Hungary was part of the Monarchy; therefore, it had no possibility to act as a sovereign nation. As it turns out, nor did it really want to. The tragedy was that by the time it almost decided to take such a course, nearly everybody had turned against it and the dismemberment of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the mutilation of Hungary became a foregone conclusion. As Glant points out, the dismemberment of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was a concept that only gradually gained shape and, in many ways, was an outgrowth of the events on the battlefield. The Slavic and Romanian minorities carried out ever-more effective propaganda warfare and through antipathy, the belief in self-determination, and secret treaties,

Britain and France accepted the idea that the Monarchy had to disappear and the losers must be punished.

Although the United States did not wish to see Hungary shorn of its ethnic blocs, because it understood the possible long-term repercussions, the successor states had a clear advantage over their old foe. President Wilson just could not go back on his main principle, self-determination. The new Czechoslovak, Romanian, and Yugoslav (Serb-Croat-Slovene Kingdom) states were all beneficiaries of policies that only sowed the seeds of future conflicts, conflicts that are still present. Thus, it is no wonder that Károlyi or Apponyi were rendered to an insignificant and unsuccessful role in the unfolding drama. In 1918 the anti-Hungarian voices gained ground, largely thanks to the successful work of the Slavic minorities working on propaganda in the United States. The chapter on propaganda shows that the strongest such activity was carried out by the British, often for the Slavic minorities, but Hungary was only a target in the last year of the war for territory. Wilson stated on October 18, 1918, that his tenth point, "The peoples of Austria-Hungary, whose place among the nations we wish to see safeguarded and assured, should be accorded the freest opportunity to autonomous development," was not valid anymore.

Another chapter of particular interest deals with the picture the American press painted about the Monarchy, in general, and about Hungary, in particular. This is the first such study with which Glant wishes to pay off "the old debt of our historiography." (103) He warns, however, that the sources are limited in numbers, their influence on public opinion and, in consequence, on foreign policy decision making was limited, and that the views of Hungary were often inextricably mixed with that of the Monarchy. Despite this fact, the main conclusion holds true that "the pre-war romantic and idealized view on Hungary went through a complete change and by 1918 it had become openly anti-Hungarian." (104) The biggest positive influence, from the Hungarian point of view, was due to Apponyi's five articles that were published in *The New York Times*. As the author puts it, "Apponyi single-handedly did more to win over the American public opinion than all the rest of the politicians and propagandists of the Central Powers together." (107) The first two articles appeared in the Sunday edition, which was important because this edition held an exclusive place in the newspaper market with huge circulations, sometimes close to a million copies. His fervent anti-Russian views might have found receptive ears, but his attack on American pseudo-neutrality

put an end to the possibility to publish widely and to his friendship with Theodore Roosevelt. In the end, Apponyi's articles provided only a meager positive influence on American public opinion.

Although "Wilson did not make a single concrete step to ensure de facto American neutrality," it is important to note that the American–British relations up until late 1916 were strained. (82) In March 1915, the British issued the Reprisals Order of March, which basically ordered all ships of presumed enemy destination to be subject to seizure. The tug-of-war of differing opinions went on and by 1916 the relations had worsened. The reason for the tension was mainly economic. On July 18, 1916, the British government issued a blacklist of eighty-seven American firms (the list also contained roughly 350 Latin American firms). These firms were accused or suspected of trading with the Central Powers. It was forbidden for British subjects to have any dealings with these firms. Fury swept across the United States. As Acting Secretary of State Frank Polk wrote to Colonel House, "This blacklisting order of the English [...] is causing tremendous irritation and we will have to do something." Wilson was perhaps the angriest, and his anger stemmed in part from the British rejection of the House-Grey Memorandum in 1915, which would have insured a possible cooperation between the two nations toward a peace favorable to Great Britain. On July 23rd, he wrote to House, "I am, I must admit, about at the end of my patience with Great Britain and the Allies. This black list business is the last straw... I am seriously considering asking Congress to authorize me to prohibit loans and restrict exportations to the Allies... Can we any longer endure their intolerable course?" A strong protest was sent to Britain on July 26th to which no answer arrived for months. To embitter things further, despite a Senate resolution for clemency, Britain hanged Sir Roger Casement, who had planned an Irish revolution against England. The Irish-Americans, in particular, were angry and their large numbers insured that public opinion of the British was negative.[2]

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[2] The quotations are from Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: Campaigns for Progressivism and Peace, 1916–1917* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1965) 65, 66, and 67. Freshly reelected In November 1916, Wilson was at the end of his patience with the British. If they wanted to fight the US, he said to House. "they could do this country no serious hurt." May, Ernest R. *The World War and American Isolation, 1914–1917* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959) 362. The black list issue remained a serious issue until the U.S. had declared war on Germany. On April 27, 1917, the *London Gazette* announced that the American firms were dropped from

Going back to Hungary, American newspapermen sometimes referred to Hungarians as "clear thinking" and once it was written, "the typical Hungarian thinks of the Balkan nations as Europeans think of Africans." (114, 112) It is of importance and gives a very useful tool in analyzing contemporary American public opinion that the three newspapermen that traveled to Budapest in 1916, the most famous of them was William Bullitt, who also met with the most important people, Tisza, Andrássy, and Apponyi, did nothing to disperse the clichés about Hungarians. If anything, they rather strengthened it.

The George Creel-led Committee on Public Information (CPI) also comes into the limelight, but we learn that, similarly to the general press, concentrated almost exclusively on Germany. It did have a Hungarian office, which was headed by Sándor (Alexander) Konta, who was the president of the American Hungarian Loyalty League, but it played no role whatsoever in the relations between the two countries. The biggest problem for the Hungarians in the States was the question of loyalty to their new country. At the end of 1915, many Hungarian-Americans were subject to different atrocities in the wake of the Konstantin Theodore Dumba incident. When the ambassador of the Monarchy reported that Secretary of State William Jennings Bryant thought that the strong language in the *Lusitania* notes was an effort to calm down American public opinion in the wake of the *Lusitania*'s deliberate sinking by a German U-boat. The content of the report got back to the United States and caused both the resignation of Bryant and the expulsion of Dumba.[3] After the incident, most Hungarians living in their new country tried to prove their loyalty. The CPI also tried to influence the immigrants through their own newspapers and tried, successfully, to make them buy war bonds, which was seen as a way of demonstrating loyalty. What is important about Wilson and the CPI is, as Glant rightly concludes, that "it was not the separatist campaign that convinced the president, but it was the president who made the decision when and under what circumstances separatist views might be practiced in the United States." (177) Thus, it was the President that controlled the situation.

Glant sets out to dethrone another myth, that of the political importance of the Inquiry, Wilson's special group of experts who were to

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it (Thomas A. Bailey, "The United States and the Black List During the Great War," *The Journal of Modern History*, 6.1 (March, 1934): 32.)

[3] The best book on the *Lusitania* is Colin Simpson, *Lusitania* (London: Longman, 1972).

plan the postwar map of Europe. As it turns out, the body was following Wilson's ideas and although it came up with numerous suggestions, it had no policy making mandate. Still, its influence and significance cannot be avoided. The Inquiry's last report was the most important from the Hungarian point of view, and we learn that the new borders of Hungary were basically already written in May 1918. Therefore, another popular fallacy, the one that the Americans were "defenders" of Hungary and its territory at the Paris Peace Conference, is proved false. Instead, the report in May 1918, contemplated the loss of two million Hungarians to the successor states and a Hungary of 112,000 square kilometers, only somewhat larger than the Treaty of Trianon ruled in the end. To be fair with the authors of that report, it states that such a plan "to place a large proportion of them [the Magyars] (nearly 25 percent) under the control of nationalistic groups whom they have regarded as serfs and inferiors would start violent irredentism and create future dissension and war." (193) Since the Inquiry, and within it the Austro-Hungarian section, did not deem it important to have an expert on hand who would be intimate with the Hungarian point of view, Glant rightly concludes that "the work of the committee was biased from the start." (196) The lack of comprehensive and practical plans for the territory of the Monarchy meant the failure of the American "scientific peace" even before the war ended. (197) There was simply no chance to resolve the deep-seated ethnic problems by the stroke of a pen.

We also learn that the work of the State Department, the War Department, and the Army and Navy Intelligence had no real effect on Wilson's foreign policy decisions concerning the Monarchy either, and not even Colonel House had as much influence in this question as it is widely believed, not to mention the fact that Wilson's alter ego was indifferent to this region. The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and especially Hungary, stayed in the background, aside from the drive to see it dismembered. Neither the American minister in Vienna, Frederick C. Penfield, nor William Coffin, Consul-General in Budapest, dealt with or sent valuable reports about Hungary to the State Department.

The most interesting chapters, especially in light of the rest, are the ones that deal with Woodrow Wilson and his relation with Hungary and Hungarians. Glant tries to dismiss the old myth that Wilson did not like the Hungarians. Although he had negative statements about Hungarian immigrants before he became president, and he saw in Hungary a nation that thwarted the freedom of the Slavic minorities, it would be an

overstatement that he was inimical to Hungary before or through World War I. Simply put, he was not that interested in Hungary. The country did not deserve a distinct place on Wilson's political map. For the political scientist, the semi-theologian, or the believer in Anglo-Saxon institutional, and other type of, superiority, other countries were much more important. Even if Wilson was more familiar with the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and its characteristics than most of his "experts" around him, it did not qualify him as an authority on Hungary, another household opinion Glant tries to disprove. It is crucial that Wilson made his foreign policy decisions on his own. The author, after immaculately summarizing Wilson's worldview, points out that the President's policy toward the Habsburg Empire was in a state of flux till the spring of 1918. Until April 1918, he had been, although in a dubious form, against the dismemberment of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. However, by then the Russian Revolution had taken place, and the new and threatening ideology of Bolshevism with its implications for the war against Germany created a new situation. According to Glant, it was the Czechoslovak Legion and the question of an independent Czechoslovak state that gave the turn-around for Wilson, who had become convinced that his moral views and strategies for a regional cooperation could be met in only this way. At the end of June, the dismemberment of the Habsburg Empire and the creation of small nation states were irrevocably decided by Wilson, thus joining his French and British counterparts. Unfortunately for Hungary, the image of Hungary after this time became plainly negative. Wilson's Central and East European policy was "unbalanced" and his handling of the Hungarian situation was "black and white." (248)

Double Prism is an important book. It examines a period in the relations between Americans and Hungarians that so far has not been examined thoroughly. Tibor Glant's conclusions are convincing and the rich documentation of sources gives credence to these conclusions. What is particularly pleasing is the appendix in which one can see all the material concerning Hungary and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in the period: pamphlets and books issued and spread in the United States, the reports of the Inquiry concerning Hungary, and the State Department's and the Inquiry's final plan of settlement, which clearly shows a lack of substantial knowledge but ample reverberation of anti-Hungarian propaganda.

As Glant says in his afterword, the relations between the two countries reached a new phase with the Versailles Peace Conference and

the Treaty of Trianon, which period lasted till the summer of 1921, when the separate Peace Treaty between Washington and Budapest was signed. He promises to write a book on that period soon. If he can keep up this clear-sighted approach, buttressed with rich archival material, and reaches similarly important conclusions concerning the relations of the two nations, another important book will have been added to the growing literature of Hungarian–American relations.