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WILSON'S FOURTEEN POINTS AND THE FALL OF AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN MONARCHY

ABSTRACT: *The paper brings an insight into how the policy, personified in famous US president Willson's "Fourteen pints", shaped the attitude of victorious Entente and allied powers and nations towards Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. It analyses how they concerned the reorganization of Central Europe after the Great War. In the second part, there was described how "Wilsonism" came to realization in the fall of 1918, serving as the formal pretext for dissolution of Monarchy.*

KEY WORDS: *Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, Entente, First World War, Wilson's fourteen points,*

The Genie is Out of the Bottle: The Declaration of the Fourteen Points

Wilson's conception of the post Great War world, we will summarily call Wilsonism,¹ whereas its declaration in Congress on January 8, 1918, we view as the „Magna Charta of Wilsonism.” It had some preludes, however, which we label as mediation attempts. Prior to January 1918 Wilson, as the president of the USA, has attempted three times to mediate between the Entente and the Central Powers. First on November 2, 1914, then on May 27, 1916, and finally on December 18, 1916.²

Among these the most significant was his memorandum of December 1916, in which he called upon the belligerent sides to state their war aims. The Entente responded to Wilson's memorandum on January 12, 1917. The

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¹ John. A. Thompson, Wilsonism: the dynamics of conflict concept, *International Affairs*, Volume 86, Issue 1, January 2010, 22-47.

² Details see Henry Kissinger, *Diplomácia*. Panem Kiadó. Budapest, 2008, 216–223.

response contained an element which foreshadowed the subsequent fate of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Concerning the dualist state the Entente, it marked as a goal: „...*the liberation of the Italians, the Slavs, the Romanians, and the Czechoslovaks from foreign rule.*”³

Historians debate to this day whether that half-sentence means the breaking up of the Monarchy or its reorganisation on a federative basis. The debate revolves around what „liberation” means. National autonomy within the Habsburg state or full independence? The question is no longer resolvable, but we think that what really matters is that the Entente’s response formulates as a war aim that something must be done in favour of the little nations of Central Europe in the conclusion of peace.

In April 1917 the US entered the war on the side of the Entente, which has ended any chance of Wilson initiating further mediation attempts that could have led the warring sides to settle for peace. The war, now with the participation of the USA, continued. In this situation, Wilson thought necessary to lay down the theoretical basis for continuing the war and the war aims to be achieved. To this end, he sent a message to Congress on January 18, 1918. In fact, this was a speech in which the president, following a long introduction, summarized in fourteen points the aims to be attained in the war.⁴

For Central Europe, understood loosely, as the immense region spreading from the Baltic Sea to the Aegean Sea, and for the greater or lesser nations to be found there, the points from 9 to 13 were relevant.

The 9th point stated that: „*A readjustment of the frontiers of Italy should be effected along clearly recognizable lines of nationality.*”⁵ This statement calls for the resolutions of South Tyrol, Istria (Trieste and Fiume), and the issue of Dalmatia by the victorious powers. These were territories to which Italy has layed claim on the basis that a significant number of Italian population lives there. This effectively meant that Italy, as a member of the Entente, wanted to disannex these territories from the Monarchy. With the 9th point Wilson has included these Italian territorial claims among the aims of war.

The 10th point established that: „*The people of Austra-Hungary, whose place among the nations we wish to see safeguarded and assured, should be accorded the freest opportunity to autnomous development.*”⁶ The interpretation of this point was hotly debated at the time of its announcement and still is even today. The adversaries of the period took diametrically opposite standpoints on the matter. Most South Slavic organisations, the politicians

³ Galántai József, *Az első világháború*, Budapest, 2001, 364.

⁴ Arthur S. Link et al., eds., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, Volume. 45, Princeton, 1984, 536.

⁵ *Ibid* 536.

⁶ *Ibid* 536.

of the Yugoslav Committee in London, and the leaders of the Czechoslovakian National Council representing the Czechoslovak emigration, interpreted the 10th point as the death sentence of the Monarchy. Hence Wilson consented to the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. To the leaders of the emigration, „autonomous development” meant full independence.

In contrast Ottokar Czernin, the Foreign Minister of the Monarchy, claimed in a statement on January 24, 1918, that „*President Wilson's latest proposals mean a significant rapprochement to the Austrian and Hungarian positions, and that some of his proposals we accept with delight.*”⁷ To back his claim he further said that: „*As far as the 13th point is concerned, it is no secret that we support the idea of an independent Polish state which would certainly include the territories inhabited by indisputably Polish populations. On this point too, I believe, we could quickly arrive at an agreement with Mr. Wilson....*”⁸

But about the 10th point he also made it clear that: „*... as for the advices about how to manage our internal affairs, I politely but firmly reject them. We do not interfere with American affairs either, but we likewise do not wish for the tutelage of any foreign power.*”⁹

As it is apparent from Czernin's reply he understood „autonomous development” as the „internal affair” of the Monarchy in which the Entente should have no say. Today historians still debate whether in his 10th point Wilson committed himself to the federalisation of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy or to its disintegration.¹⁰

The 11th point stated that: „*Romania, Serbia, and Montenegro should be evacuated; occupied territories restored; Serbia accorded free and secure access to the sea; and the relations of the several Balkan states to one another determined by friendly counsel along historically established lines of allegiance and nationality; and international guarantees of the political and economic independence and territorial integrity of the several Balkan states should be entered into.*”¹¹ This point definitely ascertained that after the war

⁷ Czernin's answer see Budapesti Hírlap 1918. January 25. <http://trianon100.hu/kronika-cikk/kronika-az-osztrak-magyar-valasz-a-wilsoni-pontokra-a-budapesti-hirlapban> (February 1919)

⁸ *Ibid* <http://trianon100.hu/kronika-cikk/kronika-az-osztrak-magyar-valasz-a-wilsoni-pontokra-a-budapesti-hirlapbanfebruary1919>

⁹ *Ibid* <http://trianon100.hu/kronika-cikk/kronika-az-osztrak-magyar-valasz-a-wilsoni-pontokra-a-budapesti-hirlapbanfebruary1919>

¹⁰ The standpoints see Edit, Marjanovic, *Die Habsburger Monarchie in politik und öffentlicher meinung Frankreichs 1914–1918*. Wien–Salsburg. 1984, 19–25; David, Kelly, Woodrow Wilson and creating Czechoslovakia. *Eastern European Quarterly* 1991/June. 185–207; Zbyněk Zeman, *The Masaryks: The making of Czechoslovakia*, London, 1990, 89–90; Romsics Ignác, *Détruire ou reconstruire l'Autriche-Hongrie? Franciaország dunai politikájának dilemmája a XX. század elején*. Romsics Ignác (ed.), Helyünk és sorsunk a Duna-medencében. Budapest. 22–23.

¹¹ Arthur S. Link et al., eds., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 45, Princeton, 1984, 536.

the Romanian, the Serbian, and the Montenegrin states must be reenacted. Interestingly, it promised sea access to Serbia. But it did so without reflecting on its feasibility on a nationality basis. It is important to highlight that, in creating the Balkan borders, this point too emphasized that borders must be drawn on the basis of the nationality principle.

The 12th point stated that: „*The Turkish portion of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development...*”¹² In this point Wilson used the same concept of „autonomous development” which he employed in the 10th point.

The 13th point established that: „*An independent Polish state should be erected which should include the territories inhabited by indisputably Polish populations, which should be assured a free and secure access to the sea...*”¹³ As can be seen, this point is definitely committed to the formation of an independent Polish state. The wording in the second half of the first sentence, „*the territories inhabited by indisputably Polish populations*” seems also to imply the unification of all territories inhabited by Polish populations on Wilson’s conception. Just as in the case of the Serbs, here too the intention to ensure sea access emerged, and likewise without giving any consideration to the possible violation of ethnic principles.

Even though Central Europe is situated far away from the colonies, it would still be instructive to check the 5th point before we proceed in our reasoning. This states that: „*A free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims, based upon a strict observance of the principle that in determining all such questions of sovereignty the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable government whose title is to be determined.*” We quoted this point, because of the expression „*the interests of the populations concerned*”.¹⁴

To summarize, we believe that Wilson’s Fourteen Points let the genie out of the bottle, the spirit of rearranging Central Europe on nationality principles. We must take note that while most politicians of the era, especially leaders of national movements, and most historians view Wilson’s January 8 speech as the declaration of the principle of national self-determination, the word „self-determination” is nowhere to be found in the text! Wilson used the expression „*along clearly recognizable lines of nationality*” in connection with borders, and „*autonomous development*” in connection with peoples living within the Turkish Empire or the Habsburg Empire, whereas in

¹² *Ibid* 536.

¹³ *Ibid* 536.

¹⁴ *Ibid* 536.

the 5th point he wrote about the consideration of „*the interests of the populations concerned*”. But we will not find the compound word „national self-determination” in the document.

The Genie Grows Stronger: The Congress of Oppressed Nationalities

In the spring of 1918 representatives of various national emigrations fighting against the Austro-Hungarian Monarch met in Rome. On April 8, 1918, Ruffini, an Italian senator, solemnly opened the Congress of Oppressed Nationalities on the Capitolium. Every major foe of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was present at the event, among the Italian politicians who hated Austria Ruffini, Albertini and Della Torre senators, Amandola, Borghese, Mussolini journalists, a „Yugoslav” delegation of 20 people led by Trumbič and Mesterovič, a Polish delegation of 8 people headed by Skirmut (the future foreign minister), the Romanians were represented by 5 delegates led by Mironescu, the Czechoslovak delegation with 7 members included Beneš, Štefanik, és Osuský.¹⁵ The influential old English and French foes of the Monarchy were present as well, such as, Seton-Watson and Wickham Steed from England, and Ernest Denis from France.

On the second day of the congress four committees were formed: 1. the propaganda committee. 2. the committee of war prisoners and internees of Austro-Hungarian nationalities. 3. the preparatory committee of the next congress. 4. the committee of formulating resolutions. The committees negotiated confidentially, they did not issue any public statement of their conferences. As one of its most important acts, they have accepted the document titled „*Declaration in the case of Austro-Hungary for the liberation of nations*”, in which they declared that the oppressed nationalities of the Monarchy do no longer wish to live within the confines of the Empire, but wish to found independent states.¹⁶ Apparently, in the spirit of Mazzini's „*Austriamessedelendam*” („*Austria must be destroyed*”), the congress has adopted the resolution of breaking up the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

The First Successes of the Wilsonian Principles

In the following weeks the leaders of emigrant groups partaking in the Roman congress exerted pressure on the Entente governments to include the

¹⁵ Hugh Seton-Watson and Cristopher Hugh Seton-Watson, *The Making of New-Europe. R. W. Seton-Watson and the last years of Austro-Hungary*, London, 265-266.

¹⁶ Henry Wickham Steed, *Through Thirty Years. A personal narrative*. Volume II, London-New York, 209-201.

breaking up of the Monarchy among the war aims. Along the road to the recognition of their aspirations, the first step was made by the US secretary of state Lansing, who stated in his bulletin on May 29, 1918, that: „*The US government followed with great interest the congress of Austro-Hungary's oppressed nationalities held in April in Rome, and acknowledges with the utmost sympathy the Czechoslovak and Yugoslav aspirations for independence.*”¹⁷

A few days later, on June 3, 1918, the Entente's Supreme War Council in Versailles has announced that it joins Lansing's statement. From this day, the Entente took as its war aim to create the Czechoslovak, the Yugoslav and the Polish state.¹⁸ This was a major turning point compared to the Entente's original war aims. In the first few years of the war, the breaking up of the Monarchy was not among the Entente's war aims. The same could be said about the USA entering the war in 1917: when president Wilson made public his Fourteen Points, he was against the breaking up of the Monarchy.¹⁹ But as the war progressed, under the surface within the British, French and American foreign policy the friends and foes of the Monarchy fought a serious battle with each other. By the summer of 1918, in the official foreign policy of the three states those have won who wanted to destroy the Monarchy. This is clearly shown by the fact that during August and September of 1918 the Entente powers one after the other recognized the Czechoslovak National Council residing in Paris as the de facto government.

Lansing's memorandums

The Austro-Hungarian foreign policy makers did not recognize the drastic change in the Entente's war aims, they thought that the war will end in the spirit of the Wilsonian principles. It was for this reason that István Burián, the foreign minister of the Monarchy, sent a memorandum on September 14, 1918, what we call the first Burián memorandum, to the belligerent powers. In it he made the proposition that the warring states should discuss on neutral territory the basic principles of peacemaking in order to end the indecisive struggle. The Entente powers uniformly rejected Burián's first memorandum. Lansing sent a message to Vienna via the Swedish government that the USA „*is unable, and unwilling to deal with meeting proposals on a matter in which she has already expressed her standpoint and intentions so clearly.*”²⁰

¹⁷ *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States 1914–1918*. Washington 1922–1923, Volume I. 802–803.

¹⁸ Ormos Mária, *Padovától Triannonig*, Budapest, 1984, 24.

¹⁹ Robert Lansing, *War memoirs of Robert Lansing Secretary of States*, Indianapolis-New York, 1935, 261.

²⁰ Galántai József, *Az első világháború*, Budapest, 2001, 471.

Lansing's message was misunderstood in Vienna, they thought that it will be possible to negotiate with the USA on the basis of the Wilsonian points. Hence, on October 2, 1918, the Joint Council of Ministers decided to call for peace on the basis of the Wilsonian points. Accordingly, on October 4, 1918, Burián sent a memorandum to Wilson, what we call the second memorandum, in which he called for an immediate ceasefire and the commencement of peace negotiations. At the same time, the German and Turkish governments sent similar memorandums to Wilson.

Lansing replied on October 8 to the German memorandum, which was followed by a quick exchange of notes in the next few days. As a result, on October 23 Lansing communicated to Berlin that Wilson is willing to mediate between the Entente and Germany on the issue of ceasefire. After this the negotiations with Germany began.

In contrast, the American secretary of state did not reply immediately to the Monarchy. Germany received the first American response on October 8, but Lansing responded to the Monarchy only ten days later, that is, on October 18. While waiting for the American response, Charles IV decided to make a historic move: on October 16 he issued an imperial manifesto, in which he proclaimed the Austrian half of the Monarchy to be a federal state. According to the proclamation, „*every tribe*” on its own territory of settlement will constitute a separate state community. The peoples will partake in the formation of the federal state through their national councils. To that end he asked his peoples to immediately contact the Viennese government via their freely elected national councils so that negotiations could begin about the formation of a federal state made of autonomous nationalities.

But the proclamation came too late, it did not have any effect on the decisions of the Entente powers, whereas the „oppressed nationalities” living within the Monarchy, rejected it as a lopsided unacceptable proposal. The politicians of nationalities were no longer thinking in autonomy, but in full independence, in an independent state.

Lansing's response to the second Burián memorandum came on October 18, 1918. In it the American secretary of state stated that Wilson's Fourteen Points could not form the basis of negotiations on peacemaking with the Monarchy. He specifically mentioned the 10th point, which promised „autonomous development” to the nationalities of the Monarchy, that since its January announcement, the US government has recognized the Czechoslovak National Council as the de facto warring government, „...*which is endowed with the appropriate authority to lead the Czechoslovaks in their military and political affairs.*”²¹ He reminded the leaders of the Monarchy that

²¹ Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the US. 1918. Supplement I. The World War Vol. I. Washington, 1933, 368.

the US government also recognized „...*the rightfulness of the Yugoslav aspirations for national liberty*.”²²For which reason, goes on Lansing, president Wilson is not in a position to continue peace negotiations purely on the basis of peoples’ autonomy. Then he claimed, that on the subsequent fate of the Monarchy, the Austro-Hungarian government should negotiate not with the USA, but instead with the Czechoslovak and the Yugoslav politicians. They would decide whether it was sufficient to them what Vienna was offering.

Lansing’s response caused consternation in the leadership of the Monarchy. They saw that after some diplomatic wrangling, Wilson was willing to negotiate with Germany on the ceasefire, whereas he was not willing even to speak with them. They were right about this: Wilson and the whole Entente took the Monarchy as a nonexistent state with which there is nothing to negotiate.

Nonetheless Charles IV made a last desperate attempt, on his order the young Gyula Andrassy, the last foreign minister of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, sent a note to the US government on October 27.²³In it Andrassy informed the American government that the Austro-Hungarian government accepts those propositions of Lansing’s October 18th memorandum, which he made in the cases of the Czechoslovaks and the Yugoslavs, and requested an immediate ceasefire and the start of peace negotiations on a separate peace. We believe that Andrassy and King Charles IV have hoped that even if the Czechoslovaks and the Yugoslavs leave the Monarchy, the Habsburg state can survive this mutilation.

Since the Entente has already committed itself to breaking up of the Monarchy, Andrassy, who occupied the post of foreign minister only for 6 days, has not received any response during his time in office. The armistice was signed under the terms of the Entente on November 3, 1918, in Padua.²⁴

The Great Wave of Self-Determination and Its Downsides

In October 1918 various national councils were formed one after another, which then proclaimed the independence of their nation, and the formation of their state.²⁵ Surprisingly, the series began with one of the ruling nations of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the Germans. Representatives of German parties in Cisleithania, the Austrian part of the Monarchy, who where

²² *Ibid* 368.

²³ <http://www.huszadikszazad.hu/1918-szeptember/nagyito/andrassy-jegyzeke>

²⁴ Rauchsteiner Manfred, *Az első világháború és a Habsburg Monarchia felbomlása*, Budapest, 2017, 809-810.

²⁵ Details see Gulyás László-Szávai Ferenc, *A Monarchia utolsó két hónapja*. Gulyás László ed. *A trianoni békediktátum története hét kötetben. I. kötet: Trianon Nagy Háború alatti előzményei, az Osztrák-Magyar Monarchia bukása*. Szeged, 2019, 480-483.

elected as members into the Imperial Council in 1911, have met on October 21, 1919, in the house of the Lower-Austrian provincial council, and on the basis of the right to self-determination proclaimed themselves to be the German-Austrian Provisional National Assembly. They took as their most important task the formation of a new German state, German-Austria.

In the last days of October there was an act of state law on almost each day: on October 28 in Prague the proclamation of the Czechoslovak Republic, on October 29 in Zagreb the Sabor proclaimed the formation of the „state of the Croats, the Slovenes, and the Serbs”. On October 30 in Turócszentmárton the Slovaks declared their secession from Hungary and their joining the Czechoslovak state. On October 31 in Krakow the Polish Liquidation Committee took the power. These events continued in November with the proclamation of the Hungarian People's Republic on November 16. The great state formation wave ended on December 1, 1918, on which day the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was proclaimed in Belgrad, and Great-Romania was formed in Gyulafehérvár.

In the fall of 1918 it appeared that Wilson's Fourteen Points was a major success in Central Europe. The nation exercised their rights to self-determination, thanks to which a whole new bunch of states has been formed. Few have noticed that the principles laid down in the Fourteen Points were contradictory right from the beginning. We have mentioned that Wilson promised sea access both to the South Slav state and the Polish state, and this stands in contradiction with the principle of ethnic borders. Indeed, Lansing's October 18th note foreshadowed the selective application of the right to self-determination in Central Europe. There will be nations (the Czechoslovaks, the Romanians, the South Slavs grouped with the victorious powers) which can exert their right to self-determination, and there will be nations (the Hungarians, the Germans, the Bulgarians who lost) which cannot.

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WILSON'S FOURTEEN POINTS AND THE FALL OF AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN MONARCHY

Summary

President Wilson sent a message to Congress on January 18, 1918. In fact, this was a speech in which the president, following a long introduction, summarized in fourteen points the aims to be attained in the war. Our opinion is that these fourteen

points played a crucial role in the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and in the emergence of the „New Central Europe”.

In the first part of our essay we present and analyse those points, from 9 to 13, which concerned the reorganization of Central Europe after the Great War. In the second part of our essay we draw up how the 14 points came to realization in the fall of 1918. We show that for the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy the war has ended not in the spirit of the Wilsonian principles. Wilson and the whole Entente took the Monarchy as a non-existent state with which there is nothing to negotiate in October 1918.

At the end of our essay we point out that in the fall of 1918 there were nations (the Czechoslovaks, the Romanians, the South Slavs grouped with the victorious powers) which could exert their right to self-determination, and there were nations (the Hungarians, the Germans, the Bulgarians who lost) which could not.