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NO "ROAD TO CANOSSA" AND NO "DEATH WARRANT": THE END OF AUSTRIA-HUNGARY REVISITED

1 The Sixtus Affair

Just as the great German push in the West came to a halt a few miles in front of Amiens, in the first few days of April 1918, Austro-Hungarian Foreign Secretary Count Ottokar Czernin gave a punch-drunk speech in the Vienna city hall. Czernin seemed eager to prove that the Entente was unwilling to consider a peace on *status quo ante bellum* terms. That's why he indiscreetly referred to the French contacts with Austria the year before. French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau retaliated by publishing one of Emperor Charles' letters to his brother-in-law, Prince Sixtus of Bourbon-Parma, who served with the Belgian army. In this letter, written almost a year ago, Charles referred to the French claims to Alsace-Lorraine as "just". Losing his nerve, Czernin first forced Charles to deny the authenticity of the letter; then suggested the Emperor should take some time out and think about appointing a regency. Instead, Charles accepted Czernin's resignation on 14 April 1918 and tried to mend fences with his German allies on his own.¹

This so called "Sixtus Affair" has often been regarded as the final straw in Austria-Hungary's submission to her big brother Germany.² Charles' subsequent visit to the German headquarters in Spa, has been compared to a "Canossa-Gang", the (in)famous submission of Emperor Henry IV to Pope Gregory VII in 1077. References to Canossa

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¹ Höbelt, Lothar: "Stehen oder Fallen?" *Österreichische Politik im Ersten Weltkrieg*. Vienna: Böhlau. 2015, 230-236.

² To quote just a few examples: Urban, Otto: *Die tschechische Gesellschaft*. Vienna: Böhlau. 1994. 908.

had been plentiful during the years of the “Kulturkampf”, the ongoing struggle between the modern state and nascent political Catholicism. Bismarck popularised the term when he promised during a debate in the German parliament in 1872: “We won’t go to Canossa.”³ Curiously enough, few of those who used that reference in either context, seem to have realized that Henry’s “pilgrimage” to Canossa had turned out to be rather an astute move. It had neutralized the Pope during a period of upheaval within the Empire. But casual readers of history with an anti-clerical axe to grind preferred the image of the kneeling Emperor in his shirt of hair, who according to legend had waited bareheaded in the snow for three days, to the reality of a clever politician who had just outwitted a dangerous rival.⁴

The German public may have been shocked when they read that Charles had referred to the “*justes revendications*” of the French to Alsace-Lorraine. But Wilhelm II and the German political elite had no reason to be surprised. That’s why Charles could not see why the Germans were so angry about it.⁵ After all, Charles and Czernin had been quite open about their proposal of bribing the French with Alsace, in return for a peace on the basis of the status quo ante – or perhaps not quite the status quo ante, because the Central Powers had in the meantime already promised Poland its independence. In fact, Charles even offered part of his own territories as an inducement, Austrian Silesia or Galicia as part of a German-dominated Poland. However, neither the Kaiser nor German Chancellor Theodor von Bethmann-Hollweg were tempted by the offer. They would only agree to border rectifications disguised as an exchange of territory in the West. Bethmann-Hollweg had become resigned to a peace with meagre results but not to an outright loss of territory.

³ For the context see Pflanze, Otto: *Bismarck and the Development of Germany, Vol. II: The Period of Consolidation, 1871-1880*. Princeton: UP. 1990. 185-206.

⁴ Weinfurter, Stefan: *Canossa: Die Entzauberung der Welt*. Munich: Beck. 2006, 19-25, 146-157.

⁵ Diary of Princess Henriette Hohenlohe, 17 April 1918. I am grateful to Herbert Fischer-Colbrie for granting me access to the diaries.

Even worse, the offer had found no takers on the side of the Entente. The return of Alsace-Lorraine might be satisfactory in terms of French domestic politics, in terms of the larger strategic picture it was pretty useless. French politicians of almost every stripe seemed to think, probably rightly so, that an admission that Germany had successfully fought off almost all the rest of Europe, was tantamount to accepting its hegemonial role in Europe.⁶ Moreover, the spring of 1917, when Charles had launched his peace offensive, was probably the worst possible moment to do so. Germany had just gambled everything on the success of unrestricted submarine warfare. As a result, Britain and France could look forward to being bailed out by the US (if only they managed to survive the U-boats). Or, as the French Commander-in-Chief Philippe Pétain put it: "Wait for the tanks - and the Americans."⁷ In the late autumn of 1916, peace proposals had been debated almost everywhere, but in the meantime the stakes had been upped. Why be content with a compromise peace, if victory might be lurking just around the corner, after all.

Czernin in his more hysterical moments had loved to threaten his Emperor with the prospect of a German army, launched for an invasion of Austria, in case Germany had reason to doubt the loyalty of her ally.⁸ That army was a figment of his imagination. With resources stretched tight between the crucial battle in the West and the beckoning of an Empire in the East, there simply were no extra divisions to be marched into Bohemia (or elsewhere). Nor did the Kaiser and his entourage take Charles' indiscreet remarks all that seriously. They were taken for what they were - a way to win the confidence of his French interlocutors, a *captatio benevolentiae* to pump-prime the abortive negotiations of

⁶ Stevenson, David: *French War Aims against Germany, 1914-1919*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1982, 54, 73, 105; Steglich, Wolfgang (Ed.): *Die Friedensversuche der kriegführenden Mächte im Sommer und Herbst 1917*. Quellenkritische Untersuchungen, Akten und Vernehmungsprotokolle. Stuttgart: Steiner-Verlag-Wiesbaden-GmbH. 1984.

⁷ Quoted in Gooch, John: *The Italian Army in the First World War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2014, 263.

⁸ The idea went back to a wild boast made by Wilhelm to Prince Hohenlohe in the summer of 1917. See the unpublished manuscript by Ottokar Czernin, *Die Brief-Affaire*, aktenmäßig zusammengestellt, 12. (copy in possession of the author).

yesteryear. Sixtus was not supposed to have handed over the letter to the French, just to read excerpts from it. Thus, when Charles denied he had written that letter, he acted in a tradition that allowed confidential notes to be disowned, once they had been “leaked”.⁹ However, crisis management in Vienna was undoubtedly poor. It put Charles into a position where he was widely seen to have been economical with the truth. But that was no reason why the Germans should have doubts about his loyalty to the Dual Alliance.

2 The Myth of the “vassal state”

German Foreign Secretary Kühlmann’s advice to Wilhelm II was to adopt “a noble and magnanimous attitude” towards his ally.¹⁰ Fortunately, the ‘Kaiser’ himself seemed to prefer a rational approach to an emotional one, for once. He threw a fit of temper, when he first read the text of Charles’s letter and for a moment even thought that Czernin’s dismissal might spell the end of the alliance, but soon came around to appreciate the unwelcome news as a blessing in disguise. He did not confide in his generals with their anti-Austrian prejudices, but waited for the advice of Chancellor Hertling who had always been sympathetic to Charles.¹¹ Kühlmann, too, suggested that Wilhelm should be kind but firm with Charles who was to be left with a feeling that he had to make amends to Germany one way or another. Thus, within the limits of the tug-of-war that had been going on for the

⁹ That was exactly the position adopted by the court of Wilhelm II when they first heard about the famous letter. Scherer, Andre - Grunewald, Jacques (eds): *L’Allemagne et les problèmes de la paix pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale (=APP)*, Vol. 4. Paris: Presses universitaires de France. 1978, 104 (12 April 1918).

¹⁰ APP IV 104, 108.

¹¹ A detailed description of Wilhelm’s reaction can be found in Fürstlich Fürstenberg’sches Archiv Donaueschingen, War Diary of Prince Max Egon II, 12-17 April 1918. Fürstenberg, with estates in both Swabia and Bohemia, was a member of both the Austrian and the Prussian House of Lords. He counted as a personal friend of Wilhelm II.

last three years, Germany might still try and profit from her ally's discomfiture.¹²

During the last three years most of the debates between Austria-Hungary and Germany had centred on two related topics: Mitteleuropa and the future of Poland. Austria had staked her claim to Poland early on; Germany had only half-heartedly consented and made her consent dependent on strengthening the ties between the two Empires into a coherent Central European Bloc ("Mitteleuropa").¹³ "Mitteleuropa" had been a project of the middle-of-the-roaders on both sides. On the one hand, the Habsburgs – both Francis Joseph and even more so, Charles – were generally unwilling to part with even a bit of their sovereignty in favour of something smacking of "ever closer union". On the other hand, died in the wool Prussians did not want to be fettered to a corpse like the Habsburg monarchy, as Hindenburg once put it. Polish independence, as promised in November 1916, with German influence preponderant, had been the alternative to the Siamese twins of Mitteleuropa and the Austro-Polish solution.¹⁴

It was Czernin and Kühlmann, the two newly appointed Foreign Secretaries, who had resurrected the Austro-Polish solution in late 1917. Kühlmann wanted the Austrians to help him fight the unreasonableness of his generals; Czernin wanted German help in combating the unreasonably optimistic views of some of his Emperor's advisers who saw openings of peace avenues where in fact there were none. The deal was: German fears about the unreliability of a predominantly Slav Habsburg Empire would be pacified by a commercial treaty and a military convention. In return, the Habsburgs would get all of (former) Russian Poland, as any further dismemberment of Congress Poland would only serve as an irritant, thus undermining the legitimacy of

¹² APP IV, 136-137 (Kühlmann to Hertling, 5 May 1918).

¹³ Kapp, Richard W. -Hollweg, Bethmann: Austria-Hungary and Mitteleuropa, 1914-1915. In: *Austrian History Yearbook 19/20 (1983/84)*, 215-236; The best summary is: Müller, Achim: *Zwischen Annäherung und Abgrenzung. Österreich-Ungarn und die Diskussion um Mitteleuropa im Ersten Weltkrieg*. Marburg: Tectum. 2001.

¹⁴ Höbelt, Lothar: The Austro-Polish Solution: Mitteleuropa's Siamese Twin. In: Jean-Paul Bled - Jean-Pierre Deschodt (eds.): *Le crise de Juillet 1914 et l'Europe*. Paris: Editions SPM. 2016, 125-136.

Charles' position as a future king of Poland (on 29 January, the Warsaw Regency actually decided to offer him the Polish crown).¹⁵

Czernin had a hard time selling the deal to Charles, just as Kühlmann faced an up-hill battle against Ludendorff who insisted on keeping part of Poland as a security corridor. But a few days before the Sixtus Affair broke, Charles had actually drafted a letter to Wilhelm, that followed the gist of Czernin's argument.¹⁶ A week later, Czernin was on his way out – and a few weeks later, on 12 May, Charles was on his way to Spa, the famous “pilgrimage to Canossa”. Prince Gottfried Hohenlohe, the Austro-Hungarian ambassador to Berlin,¹⁷ did indeed say he'd rather take part in an attack on the front, without gas masks, than join that entree. But the reason why he felt like that had nothing to do with the Sixtus letters, but with an act of “piracy” the Austrians had committed on the Danube. They had simply impounded no less than fifty-five German barges loaded with grain, to provide food for the hungry Viennese. Hertling, even though generally a favourite of the Austrians, was livid with fury, when he heard about it.¹⁸

But, lo and behold, the atmosphere in Spa turned out to be far better than Hohenlohe had expected. Both the monarchs did their best to be nice to each other. Hohenlohe noted that Charles was quite relieved at the outcome. But what exactly was the outcome of the Spa meeting? Official sources on the Austrian side do not provide any hint about the negotiations. The Ballhausplatz noted drily: “Our archive has

¹⁵ Meckling, Ingeborg: *Die Aussenpolitik des Grafen Czernin*. In: *Österreich Archiv*. Vienna: Verlag für Geschichte und Politik. Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag. 1969; Bihl, Wolf-Dieter: *Österreich-Ungarn und die Friedensschlüsse von Brest-Litowsk*. In *Studien zur Geschichte der österreichisch-ungarischen Monarchie*, Vol. VIII. Vienna: Böhlau. 1970.

¹⁶ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv (=HHStA), Politisches Archiv (=PA) I 1039, Liasse LVI, fol. 146-148 (= APP IV 90-92).

¹⁷ Hannig, Alma- Hohenlohe, Gottfried. In: Alma Hannig - Martina Winkelhofer (eds.): *Die Familie Hohenlohe. Eine europäische Dynastie im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*. Cologne: Böhlau. 2013, 228-268.

¹⁸ Diary of Princess Henriette Hohenlohe 6/7 May 1918; Landwehr von Pragenau, Ottokar: *Hunger. Die Erschöpfungsjahre der Mittelmächte 1917/18*. Zurich: Amalthea. 1931, 191-196.

not received any minutes about the negotiations in Spa."¹⁹ The two monarchs had obviously talked about "Mitteleuropa": Their alliance should be prolonged for another twenty-five years. They had talked about a military convention and about a commercial treaty. The one loss the Austrians seemed to have suffered, compared with their negotiating position prior to the uproar about the Sixtus letters, was that Charles had apparently relinquished his claims to the crown of Poland. That at least was the impression Hohenlohe got when he joined the Emperor for part of the way on the ride home.

Admittedly, Charles had never been that keen Poland. (Remember, he had offered all of Poland, including Galicia, to Germany, as a quid pro quo if they would let go of Alsace-Lorraine.) Hohenlohe also noted that the one man who seemed to be less than happy with that result was Count Istvan Burian, Czernin's successor (and predecessor) as Foreign Secretary.²⁰ Burian had none of the easy-going and sometimes treacherous charm of Berchtold and Czernin. He was infamous for his tactic of boring everyone to death with his endless monologues: "Impossible to get a word in", as Hohenlohe once complained.²¹ 1918 saw Burian at his best, or at his worst, depending on whether you were at the receiving end of his lectures. Burian had realized that the drift of the Spa meeting was not to his liking. But he insisted that after all, no formal decision had been taken and no document signed. For him, the result boiled down to a verbal "pactum de contrahendo", an undertaking to come to an agreement, sooner or later. In particular, Burian denied that Charles had given up on his plan to accept the Polish crown.²² He insisted that the "smooth execution" of the Polish question was an "inescapable" pre-condition of any Austrian concessions on

¹⁹ HHStA, PA I 505, Liasse XLVII/3-23, fol. 18 f.

²⁰ Hohenlohe Diary 13 May 1918. This particular entry actually was in Gottfried's hand, not that of his wife!

²¹ HHStA, NI. Berchtold 4, Hohenlohe to Berchtold, 18 Oct. 1915.

²² HHStA, PA I 1015, fol. 102, notes of a meeting between Flotow and Wedel, 19 May 1918. In fact, Ludendorff supported Burian's position when he told the German Crown Prince that all the rumours that the Austro-Polish solution had finally been discarded, were wrong (APP IV, p. 168).

other matters. A month later (11/12 June) Burian visited Berlin to present the Austrian case. Burian was sure his arguments had made a big impression on the Germans; it is likely they were exhausted rather than convinced.²³

Theoretically, of course, it was all up to the Poles to elect whomever they wanted as their new king. The Germans tacitly admitted the strength of the Austrian position when they tried to put a good face on the matter, actively canvassing Polish public opinion to persuade them to opt for a Prussian candidate.²⁴ But their efforts were to no avail. The Poles did not trust the Habsburgs very far, certainly not after Czernin had shocked them by handing Cholm to the Ukraine in the treaty of Brest-Litowsk.²⁵ But faced with the prospect of falling prey to either Lenin or Ludendorff, they were bound to regard Charles and the Austrians as a lesser evil. With Charles as king of Poland, they may have hoped that they could rely on almost automatic Austrian support in any future disputes with Germany. The Polish Prime Minister Jan Steczkowski even did his best to persuade the Austrian Poles in the Vienna parliament to forget their grudges against the Seidler cabinet and give the government the benefit of the doubt.²⁶

Polish preferences for the Austro-Polish solution Mark II were actively supported by Cardinal Ratti, the future Pope Pius XI, who served as unofficial Papal legate to the emerging Polish state at the time.²⁷ In the summer of 1918, German diplomats still hoped to circumvent Burian's stubbornness by an appeal to Charles who had never been

²³ HHStA, PA I 505, Liasse XLVII/3-12, telegram 93, fol 30 f.; for the German version of the meeting see APP IV, pp. 198-203 (11/12 June 1918).

²⁴ The Prussian candidate actually turned out to be an Austrian Archduke, Charles Stephen, with his castle at Zywiec, and a number of Polish sons-in-law. But he turned the offer down.

²⁵ Kindler, Klaus: *Die Cholmer Frage 1905-1918*. Frankfurt/M.: Lang. 1990. Höbel 2015 *op. cit.*, 222-228.

²⁶ HHStA, PA I 1023, Bericht 137-B/P, 11 June 1918; Statni Oblastni Archiv (SOA) Zamrsk, Diaries of Baron Oskar Parish v. Senftenberg, 10 March 1918.

²⁷ HHStA, PA I 1039, telegram 668, 27 Aug. 1918; Marozzo Della Rocca, Roberto: *Achille Ratti in Polen 1918-1921*. In: Zedler, Jörg (ed.): *Der Heilige Stuhl in den internationalen Beziehungen 1870-1939*. München: Herbert Utz Verlag. 2010. 249-284.

all that enthusiastic about the Austro-Polish solution. They hoped the Emperor could be persuaded to dismiss Burian.²⁸ But in September, the Germans admitted defeat, at least provisionally. „In the final weeks of the war, Burián's efforts actually did achieve German agreement to an Austro-Polish solution of sorts“. At that time, of course, Burian's clinching arguments already read: It was necessary to create a state of things that was satisfactory enough for the Poles so that eventually the entente would not find it all that easy to change it.²⁹

But what about Mitteleuropa? There were a few drafts floating around about the new *Zweibund*.³⁰ In a certain way, the terms were less stringent than the original. The *casus foederis* would only be triggered, if one of the partners was attacked by at least two great powers. Austria-Hungary no longer shared a border with Russia proper. That's why they wanted to make sure the Ukraine was to be included amongst their potential enemies. On the other hand, the Austrians were afraid to be involved in overseas conflicts. They insisted at least one of the two enemy powers needed to be a European one. On 20 June, Burian happily noted that the second German draft had come much closer to Austrian wishes.³¹ But the Germans did not seem to be all that eager to pursue the subject any further. In mid-July, Burian wrote a minute stating that the Austrian side had honoured the wish to work for a speedy conclusion, but, alas, the Germans had not yet finished their own internal preparations. Two weeks later, Hohenlohe, too, complained about the „awfully slow and sluggish course of the negotiations“.³²

²⁸ APP IV, pp. 242 (8 July), 262 (28 July), 285 (15 August).

²⁹ HHStA, PA I 505, Liasse XLVII/3-26, notes of the meetings on 14/15 August and 3 /4 Sept. 1918, fol. 178-193; Shanafelt, Gary: *The Secret Enemy. Austria-Hungary and the German Alliance 1914-1918*. Boulder: University of Columbia Press. 1988,200; APP IV, 297 (23 August), 328 (5 Sept.), 382-386 (24 - 28 Sept. 1918). On 21 September, Wedel actually did a U-turn and advised against any moves to have Burian dismissed (*ibid.*, 355).

³⁰ APP IV, pp. 195-197.

³¹ HHStA, PA I 505, Liasse XLVII/3-23, telegram 2997, fol. 122-133, Burian to Larisch, 20 June 1918.

³² HHStA, PA I 536. *Mappe: Ausbau des Bündnisses*, fol. 33-35 (15 July 1918); PA I 505,

There were several reasons why the Germans were not all that interested in clinching their deal with the Austrians. Even if claims that Germany was to all intents and purposes a military dictatorship at that time, are exaggerated, the Oberste Heeresleitung obviously had to be consulted. But while the great battle in the West was at its height, they simply could not be bothered. Or, as the diplomats put it, internal discussions had to be postponed because of the offensive in the West.³³ A few weeks later, on 24 June, Kühlmann fell into disfavour with the generals for publicly hinting at the failure of the offensive to achieve any decisive results. While privately admitting that Kühlmann had been right, Ludendorff still insisted on his dismissal.³⁴ On 9 July, Paul von Hintze, was appointed as Foreign Secretary. Burian soon had to deny reports that he had called Hintze a puppet of the generals, with no will of his own.³⁵ At any rate, Hintze left negotiations to his Undersecretary of State Hilmar von dem Bussche,³⁶ as he had not yet had any opportunity to study the matter closely.

In the meantime, Burian had inserted a poison pill into the negotiations about the renewal of the alliance. In June, the Austrians had promised to send a few of their divisions to the assistance of the Germans on the Western front. On 27 June, Burian took that pledge as a cue to revive one of Czernin's pet projects, a special treaty of interpretation that was supposed to define the duties of both partners

Liasse XLVII/3-23, Bericht 89 P/A-F, fol. 171-2, Hohenlohe to Burian 3 August 1918.

³³ HHStA, PA I 505, Liasse XLVII/3-23, fol. 136, communication of the German Embassy, 29 May 1918.

³⁴ Chancellor Hertling claimed Kühlmann would have survived in office if he had not been foolhardy enough to show up at General Headquarters within a few days of his controversial speech (HHStA, PA I 505, Liasse XLVII/3-23, telegram 340, Hohenlohe to Burian, 12 July 1918). Actually, the German Crown Prince had voiced similar ideas already in May (APP IV, p. 169).

³⁵ HHStA, PA I 505, Liasse XLVII/3-26, telegram 582, Burian to Hohenlohe, 14 Sept. 1918.

³⁶ Von dem Bussche had served as Czernin's colleague in Bukarest 1914-16, previously he had been Ambassador to Argentine. His daughter married the son of a good friend of Czernin, Austro-Bohemian Prince Kinsky – and retired to South America in 1940, after her husband's death.

during the current conflict more precisely.³⁷ He claimed the Austrians needed such an agreement in writing to plausibly deny any rumours that they were fighting for German expansionist war-aims. Hintze equally plausibly wondered how a secret agreement could be of any help in that respect.³⁸ The *Zweibund* was a defensive alliance. Thus, both partners were fighting to preserve their mutual possessions ("Besitzstand"). But the Austrians were eager to insert a special clause that this "Besitzstand" did not refer to minor colonial possessions that could easily be swapped for concessions elsewhere.³⁹ At the same time, they wanted to make sure that the terms of the Dual Alliance did not apply to the promises extended to their Bulgarian or Ottoman allies. The Germans were decidedly unhappy about these queries and dearly wanted to drop the subject. True to style, Burian could not be dissuaded.⁴⁰

The only negotiation that was actually concluded before the defeat of the Central Powers was the commercial treaty that was signed on 11 October. Negotiations had started in early July and taken place in Salzburg. The results turned out to be very favourable for the Austrians, indeed. There was going to be no customs union and thus no joint administration of tariffs.⁴¹ In a harbinger of times to come,

³⁷ HHStA, PA I 505, Liasse XLVII/3-23, telegram 409, Burian to Larisch, 27 June 1918. Kühlmann had still promised to deal with the matter speedily (Larisch's telegram 434 on 2 July 1918), while at the same time telling Wedel that he disliked the proposal (APP IV, p. 236).

³⁸ HHStA, PA I 505, Liasse XLVII/3-23, Bericht 82 P/B, fol. 181, Hohenlohe to Burian, 22 July 1918.

³⁹ In an earlier version of these negotiations, Burian had used the formula that in this respect of course Tsingtao (the German colony in China) could not be compared to Tarnopol (the Galician town at that time still occupied by the Russians).

⁴⁰ Burian claimed the promises to Turkey and Bulgaria had been given "unter der selbstverständlich stillschweigenden und geheimen Reserve des tamquam posse". HHStA, PA I 536, Botschaftsarchiv Berlin, Mappe: Interpretationsabkommen, Burian's telegrams to Hohenlohe No. 3368 (16 July), 3692 (1 August), reacting to Hohenlohe's reports on 18 and 22 July; a copy of Czernin's earlier draft of 15 February 1918 (fol. 41-43) and the German reply (fol. 33-40); APP IV, pp. 235 (2 July), 260 (22 July), 268 (3 August).

⁴¹ The Hungarians were said to have favoured a joint administration of tariffs (APP IV, p. 183).

the Germans had originally pushed for a synchronisation of domestic legislation on social security.⁴² That wish had been quietly shelved, too. The Austrians were allowed to keep some of their protective tariffs on industrial goods, but their agricultural exports faced no such barriers in Germany. The Austrian Minister of Commerce, Friedrich von Wieser, a wayward member of the famous Austrian School of Economics, was full of praise for his chief negotiator Richard Schüller. The treaty had fulfilled all of his wishes.⁴³

Of course, none of the diplomatic victories scored by Burian or Schüller had any bearing on future events. Only two weeks after the Salzburg agreement, on 27 October, Austria-Hungary had to ask for an armistice. But the whole course of events does show fairly conclusively that Austria-Hungary had certainly not suffered any dramatic reduction in status or influence as a result of the Sixtus Affair. If anything, Austria-Hungary had pursued a more independent line, in military affairs, too. In all the previous years, after the Carpathian battles in 1915, the Brusilov Offensive in 1916 or the 11th battle of the Isonzo in 1917, Austria-Hungary had been reduced to asking for German help to stave off military disaster. In 1918, after the collapse of Russia, Austria-Hungary could finally concentrate on fighting Italy. Once her own offensive across the Piave in June had been stopped, it was Austria-Hungary who sent a few divisions to the Western front to assist the Germans (who in turn promised to send some extra food to Austria).⁴⁴ In the autumn of 1918, Burian proudly noted that the Austrian front held fast, whereas the Germans were retreating in the West.⁴⁵ That was *hybris*, no doubt, but not the language of a down-

⁴² HHStA, PA I 505, Liasse XLVII/3-23, telegram 93, fol. 75 (12 June 1918).

⁴³ HHStA, Friedrich von Wieser diary 12 Oct. 1918; Soutou, Georges-Henri: *L'or et le sang. Les buts de guerre économiques de la Première Guerre mondiale*. Paris : Fayard.1989, 710-724.

⁴⁴ Only four divisions were actually sent, two of them got into a fight with US units in September. For details see Maximilian Polatschek, *Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront 1914-1918* (unpubl. Ph.D. Thesis, Vienna 1974). After Caporetto, Charles had already consented to send a number of batteries of heavy artillery to the Western front (Hohenlohe diaries 3 Jan. 1918).

⁴⁵ Fürstlich Fürstenbergisches Archiv Donaueschingen, Max Egon, Mappe: Politik

trodden vassal. Reports about Austria-Hungary's "vassal status" vis-à-vis Germany were greatly exaggerated.

Thus, there are few indications that the Sixtus Affair or "the road to Canossa" had "sealed the fate of Austria-Hungary as an independent entity."⁴⁶ Of course, "independence" is a term that is open to all sorts of interpretations. Within the Dual Alliance, the Habsburg Monarchy had been the junior partner from the very beginning. Even worse, Austria-Hungary had fallen behind since the war started. Germany was slightly bigger than Austria-Hungary in terms of population (65 million vs. 54 million); but the Austrians had drafted a smaller percentage of their young men into the army than the Germans or the French; in terms of divisions Germany fielded roughly twice as many divisions as the Austrians in 1914, and more than three times as many in 1917-18 (roughly 240 vs. 70 to 80);⁴⁷ German output of steel was four or five times bigger than Austrian production (13-15 million tons vs. 3-4); in 1915 Germany had produced twice as many machine guns as Austria, in 1917 almost seven times as much (104.000 vs. 15.000).

Germany had to subsidise the Austrian economy throughout the war. Pleas for food had become a standard feature of Austro-German relations.⁴⁸ On top of that, in late 1918, Hohenlohe reckoned that Austria needed at least 50 million marks a month in credits.⁴⁹ But then, the Habsburg Empire had already been characterized as

im Kriege, notes of a conversation with Burian on 2 Oct. 1918.

⁴⁶ Shanafelt 1988 *op. cit.*, 188.

⁴⁷ The Austro-Hungarian army officially counted 66 infantry divisions in mid-1918. Dismounted cavalry divisions and independent brigades brought the fighting total to something between 75 and 80.

⁴⁸ Hohenlohe diaries, 29 April 1918; Broucek, Peter (Hg.)-von Zeynek, Theodor Ritter: *Ein Offizier im Generalstabskorps erinnert sich* (= *Veröffentlichungen der Kommission für neuere Geschichte Österreichs* 101). Vienna: Böhlau. 2009. 292-5; Windischgraetz, Ludwig: *Vom roten zum schwarzen Prinzen. Mein Kampf gegen das k.u.k. System*. Berlin: Ullstein Verlag. 1920. 226; Gratz, Gustav -Schüller, Richard: *Der wirtschaftliche Zusammenbruch Österreich-Ungarns*. Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky A.G. 1930. 78.

⁴⁹ HHStA, PA I 505, Liasse XLVII/3-26, fol. 137, private letter of Hohenlohe to Burian, 11 Sept. 1918.

“proud beggars” a long time ago.⁵⁰ Indeed, one of the advantages of a close connection with Germany from the Austrian point of view was that this kind of support for the Austrian crown would continue in peace-time.⁵¹ Understandably, that was not a prospect that appealed to the German Reichsbank. Her President Havenstein warned the politicians that in such a case it was not going to be the Austrians who would follow in the wake of Germany, but Germany that would be fettered to a potential bankrupt.⁵² Thus, if Austria-Hungary’s position as one of the five traditional European great powers was slowly eroding, it was “profound forces” that were to blame, not the curious misunderstandings that followed from Czernin’s gaffe.

On the other side of the hill, power relations between the allies were more evenly balanced. Russia was superior in potential man-power, Britain in financial stamina. France had prevented the Germans from winning outright in 1914. After Russia had dropped out of the war, France provided the biggest army, Britain the biggest navy and the US crucial financial support. Within the Central Powers, Germany was clearly dominant, in military affairs, and even more so economically. Austria-Hungary was the junior partner of the Dual Alliance. Yet, the dependence thus engendered was mutual. Austria-Hungary could not have survived the war until 1918 without German support; but an Austrian collapse would have had grievous consequences for Germany, too. In many ways, both sides were eager to come to an agreement as long as that state of mutual dependence could be used as a lever for their own agenda. Once peace had been concluded, the Germans feared that the Austrians would be tempted to flirt with different partners, whereas the Austrians were afraid they would no longer be supported economically and financially.

⁵⁰ Anderson, M.S.: *The War of the Austrian Succession, 1740-1748*. Harlow: Longman 1996. 207 (quote by Henry Pelham in 1748).

⁵¹ That was the way the Austrian Minister of Finance Ferdinand Wimmer argued in Cabinet; Komjányi Miklós (ed.): *Protokolle des Gemeinsamen Ministerrates der Österreichisch-Ungarischen Monarchie (1914-1918)*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó. 1966, 568 (6 & 15 Sept. 1917).

⁵² APP IV, p. 189.

This is where the collapse of Russia affected the German-Austrian relationship in more ways than one. Austria-Hungary simply became less important after Brest-Litovsk. If Austria-Hungary had dropped out of the war in 1915 (when Russian forces had almost crossed the Carpathian Mountains into Hungary) or in 1916 (when the Brussilov offensive led to the collapse of large sectors of the Austrian front),⁵³ Russia could have concentrated on fighting Germany. Thus, Falkenhayn or Ludendorff would have faced an extra 50 divisions, at a time when the Kitchener armies added strength to the Entente front in the West. If Austria-Hungary had dropped out of the war in April 1918, it would still have been inconvenient for the Germans, but no longer lethal. Most of the Austro-Hungarian army was busy fighting the Italians. But it was unlikely that Italy would send massive reinforcements to the Western front, even more so if she were to be deprived of some of her war-aims by allied concessions to the Austrians. The crucial question might have been: what about the Balkans? Would Germany still be able to use the Austrian railways? At a pinch, traffic to Bulgaria and Turkey could now be routed through the Ukraine and the Black Sea.

German hopes – and British fears – of being able to continue the war against the Western powers even if the big push in the West failed to achieve any decisive result, rested not on dominating Austria-Hungary, but on using the potentially huge resources of Russia. British planners certainly thought so, and they were worried. Any number of memoranda talked about the need to deny the Germans the resources of Siberia.⁵⁴ The Bolsheviks were supposed to be in the pocket of the Germans, anyway. Maybe that assumption has to be regarded as a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, in July 1918 Lenin actually did ask for German help. The Germans were none too enthusiastic at first but did toy with the idea of a joint expedition against the British at Murmansk. The supplementary treaty of 27 August certainly bound Germany and

⁵³ A. Tunstall, Graydon: *Blood on the Snow. The Carpathian Winter war of 1915*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas. 2010; Dowling, Timothy: *The Brussilov Offensive*. Bloomington: Indiana UP. 2008.

⁵⁴ Kettle, Michael: *The Road to Intervention: March to November 1918*. London: Routledge. 1988, 12, 190, 374.

the Soviet Union closer together. It emphasized the common interests of both continental giants, in Baku and elsewhere.⁵⁵

True, the Germans were in two minds as to the best way of dealing with the Russian situation. The Foreign Office in the Wilhelmstrasse saw the Soviet regime as the best possible solution. The Kaiser and the military toyed with the idea of toppling the Soviet regime and substituting White Russians of a pro-German persuasion, Cossacks or whoever. Both the Germans and the allies started from the assumption that the Soviet regime could not last; that's why they both thought it advisable to establish good relations with their potential successors in time. The German Foreign Office, both Kühlmann and his successor Hintze, a former naval attaché to St Petersburg, were a little bit more down to earth in their determination to don't rock the boat and stick to the lesser evil, for the time being.⁵⁶ As far as Russia was concerned, they supported what might be called the "failed state strategy", i.e. a government "furthest to the Left, to prevent Russian consolidation, as far as possible."⁵⁷

Whatever their plans about Russia, whether they advocated sending troops against the British in Murmansk, to the shores of the Caspian Sea, or had fond hopes of sooner or later posing a threat to India, compared with the prospects opening up in the East, the Austrian perspective, including the Balkan perspective up to Baghdad, had been relegated to a secondary status. Maybe that was one of the explanations why Hindenburg was not all that interested in a close partnership with Austria and why in 1918 the Germans were so suspiciously lagging behind in pursuing the question of a "deepening" of the alliance or a military convention with Austria-Hungary.⁵⁸ The Germans grew

⁵⁵ Mawdsley, Evan: *The Russian Civil War*. Edinburgh: Birlinn. 2008, 58.

⁵⁶ The best survey still is Baumgart, Winfried: *Deutsche Ostpolitik 1918 – von Brest-Litowsk bis zum Ende des Ersten Weltkrieges*. Vienna: Oldenbourg, 1966; on the Austrian point of view Höbelt, Lothar: *Diplomatie zwischen Bündnissicherung und Friedenshoffnung. Die Außenpolitik Österreich-Ungarns 1914-1918*. In: Rumppler, Helmut (ed.): *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848-1918, Vol. XI: Die Habsburgermonarchie und der Erste Weltkrieg*. Vienna: Akademie Verlag. 2016, 1017-1094, here: 1075-1080.

⁵⁷ Kettle 1988 *op. cit.*. 126.

⁵⁸ On 8 July Cramon had presented a first draft; but nothing more was heard

increasingly dismissive about Austria-Hungary towards the end of the war, but this attitude was not coupled with any desire to bind that ramshackle structure "ever closer" to the Reich.

3 The Entente's irresolution

Even if the stories about the monarchy's "vassal status" as a result of the Sixtus Affair can be exposed as wildly exaggerated, Austria-Hungary's prestige certainly did suffer. During the winter of 1918 Austrian diplomat Count Mensdorff and Boer general Smuts as an emissary of the British Empire had still amiably talked about Austria-Hungary as a possible counterweight to German power, now that Russia was gone.⁵⁹ After the spring of 1918, though, the Entente powers seemed to have given up on Austria-Hungary. Thus, Gary Shanafelt has argued: "The impact of the Spa meeting came not from what the Monarchy really agreed but rather from what it appeared to agree."⁶⁰ Robert A. Kann who was the first to devote a scholarly monograph to the crisis half a century ago, went so far as to claim that it was "undisputed" that as a result of the Sixtus crisis the Entente passed the death sentence of Austria-Hungary.⁶¹

about it. Broucek, Peter: Die deutschen Bemühungen um eine Militärkonvention mit Österreich-Ungarn (1915-18). In: *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung* 87. 1979, 440-470; here: 467. The only critical item on the agenda might have been the pledge that both partners would henceforth use their available man-power to the full. After all, the Germans had only trained roughly 50 % of their young men, the Austrians hardly 30 % (compared to almost 90 % in the case of the French). Burian had insisted that the 'Waffenbund' should be signed at the same time as the renewal of the Alliance but should not form an integral part of it (HHStA, PA I 505, Liasse XLVII/3-23, Telegram 469, Burian to Hohenlohe, 27 July 1918). The talks had already started in January when Col. Klepsch was detailed to Berlin for that purpose (Hohenlohe diary 3 Jan. 1918).

⁵⁹ Steglich 1984 *op. cit.*, cix-cxxviii, 295-317; Fest, Wilfried: *Peace or Partition. The Habsburg Monarchy and British Policy 1914-1918*. London: St. Martin's Press. 1978.126-177, 187-206.

⁶⁰ Shanafelt 1988 *op. cit.*, 196.

⁶¹ A. Kann, Robert: *Die Sixtusaffäre und die geheimen Friedensverhandlungen Österreich-Ungarns im Ersten Weltkrieg*. In Österreich Archiv. Vienna: Verlag für Geschichte und

This supposed death sentence merits some comment. True, the Entente powers gave up hope that Austria-Hungary would agree to a separate peace. But then, this hope had always rested on a delusion. Charles had never envisaged changing alliances (like Russia in 1762 or Austria in 1813). His idea of a separate peace was a contingency plan in case the Germans refused to accept a peace offer on the basis of the status quo. Czernin in his blunt manner put the matter quite squarely to the Germans in 1917: „Let’s assume: Entente offers peace on the basis of status quo ante. You want to go on fighting. We say no. In that case the alliance is over.”⁶² To support that view he could even quote Bismarck who had always held that the Dual Alliance provided an insurance policy against unprovoked attack but did not constitute an association for mutual profit (“Erwerbsgenossenschaft”). If the Entente had wanted to create a split within the Central Powers, they needed to provide Charles with an offer of a peace “without annexations”. This they were unwilling or unable to do. Czernin was thus reduced to saying, Austria-Hungary would keep fighting for Strasbourg, just as the Germans would keep fighting for Trieste.⁶³ The only time he actually had recourse to his threat of a separate peace was when he got the impression that the German military were blocking the prospects of an agreement with the Russians at Brest-Litowsk.⁶⁴

Did the Entente, on the rebound, sign the death-sentence on Austria-Hungary? Of course, a lot of polemics were directed at the Great Four, those all powerful and all ignorant men (as Balfour termed

Politik. 1966. 54. The phrase runs through the standard literature like a red thread, see e.g. Rauchensteiner, Manfred: *Der Erste Weltkrieg und das Ende der Habsburger Monarchie 1914-1918*. Vienna: Böhlau. 2013, 941.

⁶² „Annahme: Entente stellt Friedensangebot auf dem status quo ante: Ihr sagt weiterkämpfen. Wir sagen Schluß. Dann Bündnisfall hinfällig.“ Quoted in: Fischer, Fritz: *Griff nach der Weltmacht. Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland*. Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag. 1961, 540.

⁶³ HHStA, PA I 963, Liasse 25/27d, fol. 397 (19 March 1918).

⁶⁴ Hohenlohe diary 29 Dec. 1917; APP III, pp. 182-4; Meckling 1970, 266-8, 288 f.; Paal, Vince - Seewann, Gerhard (eds.): *Augenzeuge dreier Epochen. Die Memoiren des ungarischen Außenministers Gusztav Gratz 1875-1945*. Munich: Oldenbourg. 2009, 115, 120, 127.

them)⁶⁵ for turning East-Central Europe into an unstable potpourri of successor states who easily fell prey to Hitler and Stalin later on. True enough: Austria-Hungary disintegrated in November 1918 because it had been defeated by the Entente. But the Entente had not yet made up its mind about what to do with Austria-Hungary. It had early on promised Serbs, Italians and Romanians pieces of Austro-Hungarian territory. It had followed in the footsteps of the Central Powers by advocating the creation of an independent Poland, after the Russian collapse. Logically enough, it had tried to encourage subversive acts by the smaller nationalities of Austria-Hungary, just as the Austrians had done when they unleashed Pilsudski against Russia – or as Germans and Turks had tried to incite the Muslims of the British Empire to join a jihad. *Nota bene*: None of these attempts had been strikingly successful.

The crucial step that was often interpreted as a "death warrant" on Austria-Hungary was the link established with the Czechoslovak Committee in exile in mid-1918. Or as US Secretary of State Robert Lansing put it ironically: If he were an Austrian he would "retaliate by recognizing the independence of Ireland, Egypt and India". In his opinion, Britain was again trying to have "one rule for herself and another for other nations."⁶⁶ But actually, Lansing got it all wrong (or he just was not privy to the internal reservations of the British). Lord Robert Cecil made it quite clear that he had not given Benes a guarantee of independence. He had just done the minimum necessary to persuade Benes to put the Czechoslovak legion in Siberia at the Entente's disposal.⁶⁷ The Czechoslovak Legion – formed of Austrian POWs willing to fight for the Entente – was supposed to be transported to the Western front via Vladivostok.⁶⁸ In May 1918, when fighting

⁶⁵ MacMillan, Margaret: *Peacemakers. The Paris Conference of 1919 and its Attempt to End War*. London: Murray 2001, 446.

⁶⁶ Kalvoda, Josef: *The Genesis of Czechoslovakia*. Boulder: University of Columbia Press. 1986. 393 (23 August 1918).

⁶⁷ Kettle 1988 *op. cit.*, 152.

⁶⁸ Miller Unterberger, Betty: *The US, Revolutionary Russia and the Rise of Czechoslovakia*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 1989; McGuire Mohr, Joan: *The Czech*

between the Czechoslovaks and the Bolsheviks started along the Transsiberian railway, the Germans had been crossing the Marne once again. That's why Clemenceau insisted they be sent to France as soon as possible. He may also have cherished the fanciful notion that Czechs fighting in Europe would trigger an uprising in Prague.⁶⁹

Britain realized that every Czech sent to Europe the round-about way via Vladivostok would mean one American less, because of the lack of shipping. In their view, it was a much better use of both Czech and Japanese forces, to send them against the Bolsheviks – and the Austrian and German POWs the Bolsheviks were supposed to be arming in Siberia and Turkestan.⁷⁰ If many of the assumptions behind that strategy rested on rather shaky foundations, the logistics behind it were probably sound enough. Benes as the Czech Committee's man on the spot in Paris rose to the occasion and managed to make the most of the situation. As Josef Kalvoda has pointed out: „The anti-Bolshevik uprising [in Siberia] helped Masaryk and Benes, who were opposed to it, to obtain recognition as the de facto belligerent provisional government of the then non-existent Czechoslovak state.”⁷¹ Benes played off the French against the British, pandered to both of their prejudices on occasion and extracted what was often taken as a recognition of Czechoslovak independence but was at most a recognition of the status of a belligerent, along the lines accorded to the Confederates during the American Civil War. The British formula read: Masaryk's Committee was recognized as the „supreme organ of the Czechoslovak movement in Allied countries”.⁷² Whatever it was, it had little to do with the politics of Austria-Hungary but a lot with the dilemmas created by the Russian Civil War.

President Woodrow Wilson's famous Fourteen Points included a call for the “freest opportunity of autonomous development” for

and Slovak Legion in Siberia, 1917-1922. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2012.

⁶⁹ Kettle 1988 *op. cit.*, 172.

⁷⁰ As Kettle demonstrates that danger was massively overrated. *Ibid.*, 14, 61, 79, 185, 269.

⁷¹ Kalvoda 1986 *op. cit.*, 338.

⁷² Fest 1978 *op. cit.*, 237.

the "subject nations of both the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman empires". Again, that was a far cry from independence. The only nation that was promised independence in unequivocal terms was Poland (and that came largely at the expense of Russia). Even towards the end of the war, Wilson did not change his tune. In October, he just informed Burian that the Slavs themselves "and not he should be the judges of what action will satisfy their aspirations".⁷³ That was a statement of fact, more than anything else. Once the Habsburg Empire surrendered – and the note asking for an armistice "without waiting for the results of other negotiations"⁷⁴ on 27 October was widely taken as a surrender – the constituent nations of Austria-Hungary, or their political elites, simply opted for independence. There were a number of diplomats on both the English and the French side who considered that development with very mixed feelings. After all, if nation states were formed on the territory of the Habsburg monarchy, it was more than likely that the 10 million Austrian Germans would sooner or later join Germany.⁷⁵

But there was no way any of the Western diplomats, or even the Great Four together, could put the genie back into its bottle. It is unlikely the Western powers could have saved the monarchy or provided it with a new lease of life, even if they had wanted to do so. Once the black-and-yellow colours had finally come down, there was no way the subject "nationalities" could be dissuaded from setting up shop on their own. Any suggestion that Czechs or Slovenes should please go back to a reformed version of the Habsburg monarchy for the sake of the European balance of powers would have been laughed out of court in Prague and elsewhere. The Great Four could fiddle with the small-print: They could give Marburg/Maribor to Styria or Yugoslavia; they

⁷³ Foreign Relations of the United States 1918, Supplement I, 368.

⁷⁴ FRUS 1918, Supplement I, 404 f.

⁷⁵ Marjanovic, Edith: *Die Habsburger Monarchie in Politik und öffentlicher Meinung Frankreichs 1914-1918*. Veröffentlichungen zur Zeitgeschichte 3. Vienna: Geyer Edition. 1984, 150-6; Shanafelt, 1988, 206, 210; Krizman, Bogdan: *Austro-Hungarian Diplomacy before the Collapse of the Empire*. *Journal of Contemporary History* 4/2.1969, 97-115; here: 109-112; Fest, 1978, 249 f., 257 f.

could give Eger/Cheb to Bavaria or Bohemia or Sopron/Ödenburg to Austria or Hungary, but they could not draw the clock back. Whether one approves of the dissolution of the Habsburg monarchy or not, the decision was no longer theirs. It was a decision they ratified, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, for lack of an alternative.

4 Domestic politics: “Two irons in the fire”

What was the impact of the Sixtus crisis on the domestic politics of Austria-Hungary? It certainly played a conspicuous part in the estrangement of Charles from his Austro-German subjects, among them the very people who had hitherto formed the bedrock of support for the monarchy. Following the revelations about the letters to Sixtus, all sorts of unfavourable rumours were circulated and believed. To quote just a few examples: Charles’ Adjutant General, Prince Zdenko Lobkowitz, complained that these days to attend the House of Lords felt like mixing with a coterie of Bolsheviks. Most of the aristocracy sided with Czernin – and against Charles, or rather loved to pin the blame on his wife, Empress Zita, and her relatives, the Bourbon-Parma family. Hohenlohe’s wife Henriette, herself an Archduchess, actually confided to her diary that she was in favour of Charles abdicating (or maybe withdrawing in favour of a regency headed by her uncle, Archduke Eugene).⁷⁶

The suspicions raised by the Sixtus crisis were exacerbated when Charles asked for an armistice in October, without waiting for German consent, thus technically committing a breach of the Dual Alliance. This provoked resentment among Austro-Germans of all stripes. Even the Social Democrats, who had always favoured a compromise peace, talked about treachery (learnedly quoting Schiller’s famous lines about the “gratitude of the Habsburgs”).⁷⁷ Of course, Social Democrats

⁷⁶ Hohenlohe Diary 13 & 21 April 1918; Griesser-Pecar, Tamara: *Die Mission Sixtus. Österreichs Friedensversuche im Ersten Weltkrieg*. Vienna: Amalthea. 1988.332.

⁷⁷ See Wilhelm Ellenbogen’s speech as reported in the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* of 31 Oct. 1918 and the paper’s leading articles on 29 & 30 Oct. 1918; the latter article admitted

needed no extra excuse to opt for a republic in 1918. Conservatives, on the other hand, were very much in two minds about their course of action. Without any strong lead on the part of the Emperor, they chose the path of least resistance.⁷⁸ Thus, while the misunderstandings between the monarch and the elites of the monarchy, were no root cause of the collapse of the monarchy, they go some way towards explaining why there was no viable legitimist movement in Austria during the inter-war years.

Usually, however, the reverse side of the coin has received more attention: Conventional wisdom has it that the Slav nations finally lost faith in the monarchy when they perceived that she was irretrievably wedded to following the "German course". This is not a very plausible argument. First of all, the "Slav" majority of Austria was a purely theoretical one. The Slavs of Austria included both Poles and Ukrainians who were at daggers drawn. In terms of war aims, the Poles were in favour of the Austro-Polish solution, the Ukrainians – and the Czechs – were bitterly opposed to it. Ukrainians, on the other hand, were quite willing to support a "German course", if only the Germans turned their back on the Poles, who had for a long time enjoyed the benefits of their position as the standard government party of the Austrian half of the monarchy. Relations between the South Slavs, Slovenes, Serbs, Croats and the Muslims of Bosnia, presented an even more complicated picture. While the monarchy had certainly lost support among the Croats because it was unable to offer them a convincing perspective, South Slav fears concentrated on the claims of Hungarian and Italians. Prussian influence played next to no part in their calculations.

All politics is local. German and Czech politicians had for a long time been playing the game of painting their opponents in treasonable, irredentist colours, as Russian or Prussian stooges. This was a strategy designed to appeal to the Court. But their real grievances were far removed from great power politics. Predictably, both sides referred to

Habsburg treachery was a crime born of "*unwiderstehlichem Zwang*".

⁷⁸ Alexander Lernet-Holenia wrote a novel in the inter-war-years, „*Die Standarte*“ that highlights the disappointment of a young officer who went to Schönbrunn to offer his services to the crown and witnessed only signs of dissolution.

the principle of self-determination where it suited them and blithely disregarded it whenever it threatened to undermine their political aims. Germans demanded autonomy for the Sudeten Germans but were unwilling to grant it to the Slovenes; Czechs wanted autonomy for the Slovaks but not for the Sudeten Germans. (Maybe only the German Social Democrats were more even-handed in their approach to national autonomy.) The Czechs had hoped that Trotzky would throw them a life-line during the negotiations at Brest-Litovsk; the Sudeten Germans had hoped that Berlin would support their aspirations.⁷⁹ Both were mistaken. Trotzky could not care less for the Czechs; German diplomats tried to persuade Austrian bureaucrats to listen to Slav grievances. The Dual alliance, they argued, could only function smoothly if the Slavs supported it, too.⁸⁰

In the mean-time, as long as the outcome of the war was uncertain, the Czechs followed a strategy of the “two irons in the fire”.⁸¹ The Czechs must appear to be on the side of the victorious powers, whoever that happened to be. They did not want to disown Masaryk and his Czechoslovak Committee in exile by joining the Austrian government nor did they want to burn their bridges by openly embracing irredentism.⁸² In the spring of 1918, there were all sorts

⁷⁹ Höbelt, Lothar: Zwischen Militärregime und nationaler Autonomie. In: Maly, Karel - Soukup, Ladislav (eds.): *Vyvoj ceske ustavnosti v letech 1618-1918*. Prague: Nakladelstvi Karolinum. 2006, 757-764.

⁸⁰ APP IV, pp. 226-8, Wedel to Bergen, 29 June 1918; Koralka, Jiri: Germany's Attitude towards the national disintegration of Cisleithania (April - Oct. 1918). In: *Journal of Contemporary History* 4/2 (1969), 85-95.

⁸¹ The phrase was coined by Antonin Svehla, the leader of the biggest Czech party, the Agrarians. Rees, H. Louis: *The Czechs during World War I: The Path to Independence*. East European Monographs, no. 339. Boulder, Colo.: East European Monographs. 1992. 54; Velek, Lubos: *Die tschechischen bürgerlichen Parteien im Weltkrieg 1914-1918*. In: Heeresgeschichtliches Museum (ed.): *Der Erste Weltkrieg und der Vielvölkerstaat. Acta Austro-Polonica 4*, Vienna. 2012, 165-178.

⁸² The diary of Young Czech politician and historian Zdenek Tobolka provides a fascinating glimpse behind the scenes of Czech politics: Kucera, Martin (ed.): *Zdenek Tobolka. Muj denik z proni svetove valky*. Prague: Nakladelstvi Karolinum, 2008; see also Mamatey, Victor: *The Union of Czech Political Parties in the Reichsrat 1916-18*. In: Kann, Robert A (ed.): *The Habsburg Empire in World War I*. Boulder: East European Quarterly. 1977. 3-28.

of contacts between the main-stream Czech parties and government ministers – in particular, Count Ernst Silva-Tarouca, the Minister of Agriculture.⁸³ These contacts were not helped by the German agitation ("furor teutonicus") unleashed by the Sixtus Affair,⁸⁴ but it was not until fortunes had decidedly shifted in July 1918 that a distinct movement to line up behind Kramar's fundamentalist opposition became discernible in Czech politics.⁸⁵ The survival or dissolution of the Habsburg monarchy was not so much a matter of sentiment, of loyalty versus treason, but a result of political constraints and options.

5 The impossibility of unilaterally opting out of the war

The gist of the German-Austrian relationship during World War I can easily be summed up: Whoever was responsible for the outbreak of war, Germany had saved the monarchy from its enemies in 1914-16; in 1917-18 it sacrificed the monarchy by its untimely provocation of the US, a few weeks before Russia started to withdraw from the war. For Austria-Hungary, the war had lost its rationale after all her initial enemies had dropped out of the war. The monarchy had no stake in fighting the Anglo-Saxon powers. The trouble was there was no way the Austrians could simply have ended the war, unilaterally. Withdrawal into neutrality was no viable option. Neutrality begged the question: "Neutral for whom?" The entente would not have rewarded a neutrality that left Germany's lines of communications with Turkey intact. The Germans would not have condoned a neutrality that threatened such vital interests.

⁸³ A running commentary on Czech politics can be found in the diaries of Baron Oskar Parish von Senftenberg, a descendant of the Scottish bankers' family who served as vice-president of the Conservative Party among Bohemian great landowners. His diaries are held in Statni Oblastni Archiv (SOA) Zamrsk, some of the letters of Silva-Tarouca to his wife in SOA Praha; see: Höbelt 2015 *op. cit.*, 224-226, 232, 246.

⁸⁴ For these discussions see SOA Zamrsk, Parish diaries, entries of 12 & 26 Jan., 5 & 15 Feb., 7, 23 & 25 April 1918.

⁸⁵ Urban, Otto: *Die tschechische Gesellschaft*. Vienna: Böhlau. 1994, 913.

In this case, at least, Czernin and Clemenceau saw eye to eye: The French Prime Minister argued that L'Autriche „est livrée aux Allemands par la fatalité des choses”.⁸⁶ Czernin emphasized that the monarchy could not simply exit from the war unilaterally. If she wanted to break with the “German course”, the only way to do so was by switching sides. Under 18th century conditions, Emperor Charles might have opted for such a U-turn. But such a “renversement des alliances” was difficult to execute under 20th-century circumstances. It is far from certain that he could have saved the Habsburg Empire by doing so. Instead, he might have unleashed a civil war, resulting in a break-up of the monarchy under circumstances far worse than the dissolution of November 1918. Of course, there is no definite answer to all these “iffy” questions. However, Czernin’s warning sounds plausible that one must not think aloud about such dangerous ideas. It was either do or don’t. Charles didn’t. One cannot really blame him for that.

⁸⁶ Marjanovic 1984 *op. cit.*, 134.; Czernin, Ottokar: *Im Weltkriege*. Berlin and Vienna: Ullstein & Co. 1919, 167.

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