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“A LIFE AND DEATH QUESTION”:
AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN WAR AIMS
IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR¹

Introduction

While a good deal of research has been done on the war aims of Germany and a number of other Great Powers, the aims of Austria-Hungary have been comparatively neglected. This chapter seeks to reappraise Austro-Hungarian war aims and to argue that they were far from incoherent, inconsistent, or insignificant. Rather, both civilian and military leaders in Vienna and Budapest pursued aggressive and expansionist policies aimed at securing and increasing the territorial, economic, and military power of the Dual Monarchy. A detailed analysis of the Monarchy's most important war aims, as discussed internally and in conjunction with its most important ally, Germany, will demonstrate three points: first, that these war aims were more offensive, expansionist, and annexationist in the Balkans and in Poland than previously thought; second, that the Foreign Ministry remained in overall control

1 Marvin Benjamin Fried: "A Life and Death Question": Austro-Hungarian War Aims in the First World War. In : Holger Afflerbach (Ed.), *The Purpose of the First World War. War Aims and Military Strategies*. Schriften des Historischen Kollegs, Band 91, Berlin/Boston 2015, S. 117-140.

of the formulation of war aims, in opposition to the army's wishes and contrary to the German example; and third, that Austria-Hungary's at times almost delusional insistence on its principal war aims was of considerable historical importance as a factor prolonging the war.

Phase I: Stalemate and Uncertainty – July 1914 to October 1915

Historians of the Dual Monarchy agree that, at the outbreak of the war in July 1914, few of its leaders had any specific war aims in mind beyond the military defeat and political subjugation of Serbia. However, once the Monarchy was at war with Russia and it was clear that the conflict would not be as short as originally hoped, the Austro-Hungarian leadership began to develop detailed, and ultimately very extensive, war aims which formed the subject of furious debate at the highest echelons of power. Initially, the military focused on battlefield successes in Serbia and Galicia, while the diplomats concentrated on preventing hostile interventions by Italy and Romania.

But from the very start of the war until the defeat of Serbia eighteen months later, Austro-Hungarian officials, confronted with stalemate on the battlefield and potential threats from the Monarchy's neighbours, were uncertain about their wartime goals. Even so, as this section will show, key policies were developed and crystallised with regard to the Balkans and Poland. In these months of relative political harmony, the Foreign Ministry (*Ministerium des Äußeren*, henceforth MdÄ) under Leopold Count Berchtold and the Military High Command (*Armeeoberkommando*, henceforth AOK) under General Conrad von Hötzendorf were in agreement that political and military hegemony over Serbia and the Western Balkans was a vital war aim. The Hungarian Prime Minister István Tisza, by contrast, was more preoccupied

with so-called “negative war aims”, notably warding off hostile Romanian, Italian, and even Bulgarian intervention. It was Berchtold’s perceived weakness in this area that led to his replacement by the “Balkanist” István Baron Burián von Rajecz.² As Burián was Tisza’s close ally, however, the change still left the MdÄ in a strong position to insist that an honourable peace depended on victory in the Balkans rather than against Russia.

Given the military defeats the Monarchy was facing on all fronts, the AOK’s influence on war aims was as yet somewhat limited. Yet, the whole Austro-Hungarian leadership – both military and diplomatic – continued to pursue offensive goals in the Balkans, even when the crushing might of Russian intervention forced them to undertake a northwards troop deployment the purpose of which was mere survival. Even so, in these months of AOK failures to achieve victory on either front, the MdÄ was less inhibited than it would ever be at any later stage about defining the Monarchy’s war aims, even if these remained theoretical for the time being. It was these plans that provided the framework for consistent war aims planning by the MdÄ, albeit later modified by the AOK’s excessive and Tisza’s minimalist demands, but continually under the auspices of the Monarchy’s foreign policy establishment. Finally, the conviction of the elites, even after several failed invasions of Serbia, was that an honourable peace could not be achieved unless their Balkan war aims were met – hence the need to fight on.

2 Francis Roy Bridge: Österreich(-Ungarn) unter den Großmächten. In: Adam Wandruszka/Peter Urbanitsch (ed.): Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918. vol. 4,1: Die Habsburgermonarchie im System der internationalen Beziehungen. Wien 1989, pp. 313–318.

War Aims Regarding Serbia and the Balkans

The area where Austro-Hungarian officials were most united over war aims was Serbia: it was here that the sacrifices of the war could be made good in terms of territorial expansion and political control. The question was just how much could the Monarchy demand.

Tisza's towering stance against an offensive war at the Common Ministerial Council (*Gemeinsamer Ministerrat*, henceforth GMR) of 7 July 1914 in response to Sarajevo is well documented;³ he followed it up with a letter to Emperor Franz Joseph himself insisting that Serbia should not be "destroyed, much less annexed"⁴ – a position he would hold to throughout his term in office. Instead, Serbia must cede territory to Bulgaria, Greece, and Albania, along with a few "strategically important border corrections" in favour of Austria-Hungary; and pay reparations. All this, Tisza argued, would suffice to keep Serbia under the Monarchy's control. The fact that he hoped that this "middle road",⁵ non-annexationist approach might suffice to keep Russia out of the war only testifies to the unbridgeable gulf that had opened up between the Monarchy and Russia. Tisza was, after all, the most moderate member of the GMR, yet even he was espousing the reduction of Serbia as a war aim. Although he still professed a desire for "as little territorial growth as possible", he nevertheless stated that

3 See i.e.: Samuel R. Williamson, Jr.: *Austria-Hungary and the Origins of the First World War*. New York 1991; Wandruszka/Urbanitsch (eds.): *Habsburgermonarchie* (see note 1); József Galántai: *Hungary in the First World War*. Budapest 1989; Richard F. Hamilton/Holger H. Herwig: *Decisions for War, 1914–1917*. New York 2004.

4 Tisza to Franz Joseph, 8.7.1914, Magyarországi Réformátus Egyház Zsinati Levéltár (= REZL) [Hungarian Reformed Church Synodal Archives, Budapest], 44b.12.10a.

5 *Ibid.*

some regions needed to be annexed due to “very important strategic concerns”, including the north-western corner of Serbia called the Mačva, the north-east of Serbia around Negotin, and Belgrade.⁶ He expressed similar views to the Germans.⁷ These were by no means minor border rectifications, and demonstrate an incremental growth in Tisza’s war aims planning that brought it closer to the MdÄ’s goals. After the AOK lost Belgrade and Schabatz (the administrative centre of the Mačva) in mid-December 1914 and it even looked as though the Serbs would launch a counter-attack into Austro-Hungarian territory, Tisza spoke of an impending “catastrophe”.⁸ Yet despite what was looming on the northern front, Tisza argued to Berchtold and the Emperor that quashing the danger in the south and solving the Serbian question was still the “most important principal duty” of the Monarchy, which would have to be “solved by all means”.⁹

Berchtold, too, was remarkably tenacious in his insistence on the primacy of the Balkan theatre:¹⁰ from a “political perspective the prostration of Serbia” and the ancillary benefits of extending the Monarchy’s influence in the Balkans were “far more important” than advancing further in Russia or even recapturing occupied Austrian territory in Galicia.¹¹ Although he generally deferred to Conrad on military matters, in one of Berchtold’s few moments of independent strength he emphasised the “great political importance” of the Balkan front;¹² proposals for a “peace without victory” could not be entertained as long as the Serbian Army was

6 Tisza, Memorandum, 16.11.1914, REZL, 44b.12.10a.

7 Tisza, Aide Memoire, 5.12.1914, REZL, 44.7.21-22.

8 Tisza to Franz Joseph, 23.12.1914, REZL, Box 45/17.

9 Tisza to Berchtold, 15.12.1914, Haus-, Hof-, und Staatsarchiv, Wien (= HHStA), PA-I-499.

10 Berchtold to Giesl (AOK), 26.11.1914, HHStA, PA-I-500.

11 Ibid.

12 Berchtold to Giesl (Conrad), 26.11.1914, HHStA, PA-I-499.

still intact. While the Foreign Minister professed to be concerned with securing the supply lines to Turkey as the Germans wanted, it was the goal of bringing Serbia to its knees that was “an absolute imperative”.¹³

The Foreign Ministry’s officials, who were engaged in developing various political and economic plans for Serbia, went even further and sometimes even disregarded the views of Tisza. One of their plans, for example, drawn up for Berchtold by MdÄ Section I (Balkans) in early August 1914, listed various ways in which Serbia could be subjugated and exploited. The most “radical” method, and one they recognised as being contrary to the GMR decision, was Serbia’s complete disappearance by means of annexation and integration.¹⁴ Alternatively, an “independent” Serbian state might be limited by a customs union or similar device, although Austria-Hungary would need to control much of the country’s internal administration such as customs and finances. If the country was to be released after the war, the officials recommended a commercial treaty similar to those prior to 1908.¹⁵

In practice, however, from the outbreak of war until the new year, it was Tisza’s position on Serbia that was the decisive factor in Austro-Hungarian war aims planning. During the July Crisis, his goal had been to prevent Russian involvement by assuring the world of Austria-Hungary’s defensive intentions. After this failed, he began to gradually support and then even to spearhead the MdÄ’s policy of limited annexations, particularly in talks with the Germans. Moreover, he agreed with the MdÄ that, although the AOK was suffering heavy losses on the Russian front, success on the Balkan front remained the principal goal; they had similar objectives in key trans-Danubian border areas such as Bel-

13 Ibid.

14 AndrÁssy, Denkschrift, 10.8.1914, REZL, 44.7.21-22.

15 Ibid.

grade, Mačva, and Negotin. Although Berchtold and Tisza had some differences in approach, the fact their goals were the same allowed the MdÄ to retain overall control of policymaking and the formulation of war aims. For the MdÄ as for Tisza, a victory in the Balkans remained the only basis on which a peace with Russia could be negotiated.

Polish Sub-Dualism or Tisza's Division?

In addition to the Balkans, Austro-Hungarian officials spent considerable time debating the future of Poland. The question of Polish independence was a poisoned chalice for Austria-Hungary. On the one hand, removing Poland from the already overwhelming Russian power-complex was a clear policy goal from mid-August 1914,¹⁶ but acquiring it would not necessarily be beneficial. True, some politicians in Vienna might calculate that detaching the Galician Poles and uniting them with their brethren in Congress Poland would remove from the *Reichsrat* an important Slav grouping which threatened the German majority. But that is where the potential benefits ended. A strengthening of the Polish national consciousness might lead to further centrifugal pressures in the Monarchy. The Hungarians, for their part, were dead against anything that might lead to the replacement of Dualism by a Trialist system that would dilute Magyar power. Tisza therefore supported a so-called Austro-Polish solution, which would see Poland unified but under *Cisleithanian* (i.e. Austrian) suzerainty in a “sub-Dualist” fashion.

With the defeats on the Russian front in 1914 and the loss of Galicia, neither option could be implemented. This did not prevent the MdÄ from developing its plans, how-

16 Lothar Höbelt: Die austropolnische Lösung – eine unendliche Geschichte. In: Heeresgeschichtliches Museum (ed.): Der Erste Weltkrieg und der Vielvölkerstaat (= Acta Austro-Polonica, vol. 4). Wien 2012, pp. 35–54.

ever. For the former Consul General in Warsaw and future *Zivillandeskommissar* in Lublin (Poland), Leopold Andrian zu Werburg, for example, the aim of this war must be for Austria-Hungary to remain “independent and strengthened”;¹⁷ and his maximum programme, to be implemented if Germany managed to be victorious in the west, was to make Austria-Hungary truly a “European Great Power of the first order” through widespread annexations in Poland at the expense of a defeated Russia.¹⁸

The Hungarians, by contrast, were less interested in annexations in Poland and Tisza’s bias in favour of Serbia became clear. Rather than insisting on Bosnia for Hungary as a compensation for Poland’s falling to the Austrian half of the Monarchy, he was already thinking a step ahead. As early as December 1914 he recommended to Berchtold and various other leaders a pre-emptive division of (as yet unconquered) territory. With the excuse that a “triple allocation” of civilian occupation personnel in Serbia (Austrian, Hungarian, and Imperial Austro-Hungarian) was wasteful and would lead to “completely superfluous tensions”, Tisza recommended a “competitive advantage” approach.¹⁹ By employing “Hungarian officials in Serbia and Austrian officials in Russian Poland”, Tisza thought a “natural” division of labour would strengthen the Monarchy’s administration of each of these regions.²⁰ Although his request was rejected by both Berchtold and the Austrian Prime Minister Count Stürgkh,²¹ Tisza’s goal had been to make use of Hungarian officials in Serbia to prevent the army’s de facto annexation,

17 Andrian, Denkschrift “Übersicht der für den Friedensschluss in Erwägung zu ziehenden Lösungsmodalitäten”, December 1914, HHStA, PA-I-496.

18 Ibid.

19 Tisza to Berchtold, 2.12.1914, HHStA, PA-I-973.

20 Ibid.

21 Stürgkh to Tisza, 11.12.1914, HHStA, PA-I-973.

gambling that the Austrians would never allow Poland to secede entirely.

The other problem with Poland was Germany's involvement, as Poland was a central war aim for Berlin too.²² As early as August 1914 the German State Secretary Gottlieb von Jagow had rejected the idea of an Austro-Polish solution,²³ and the German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg had tied the question to the *Mitteuropa* programme. *Mitteuropa*, the initially vague German plan for a customs union with Austria-Hungary and any other friendly or dependent countries, would remain German policy throughout much of the war and was formally put forward in November 1916 as a condition for Germany's acquiescing in an Austro-Polish solution.²⁴

Burián's Brinkmanship

Berchtold's replacement by Burián at the helm of the MdÄ, the result of the former's perceived weakness in the face of Italian threats of war, strengthened Tisza further. Burián was dismissed by his detractors as a mere “doctrinaire” diplomat who “has always been in the Balkans and conducted a Balkan policy”.²⁵ In the event, however, Burián, stern of demeanour and given to strong rhetoric, applied

22 Gary W. Shanafelt: *The Secret Enemy. Austria-Hungary and the German Alliance, 1914–1918*. New York 1984, p. 39.

23 John Leslie: *Austria-Hungary's Eastern War Aims. August 1914 to August 1915*. Unpublished Ph.D. Diss. Cambridge 1975, p. 45; cited in: Höbelt: *Austropolnische Lösung* (see note 15), p. 2.

24 Shanafelt: *Secret Enemy* (see note 21), p. 71.

25 Burián von Rajecz, S., (edited by Magyarországi Réformátus Egyház Zsinati Levéltár, Horváth, E. and Tenke, S.), *Bárá Burián István Naploi* [diaries], (henceforth *Burián Napló*), 1907–1922, Budapest 1999, p. 139, fn. 159; quoting Forgách to Tisza, 26.2.1915, REZL, 44b 154-155, 44a 27.

himself with some vigour to strengthening the prestige of the Monarchy and ensuring its parity with Germany. To this end, he engaged in a degree of brinkmanship, rejecting the option of Serbian peace, for example, but also the army's annexationist attitudes, in pursuit of policy aimed at securing the conditions necessary to achieve the Monarchy's war aims in the Balkans.

Initially, he concentrated on preventing the Balkan neutrals and Italy from attacking Austria-Hungary. In February 1915 he stated that he would rather have war with Romania and Italy than give up even a "square meter"²⁶ of Austro-Hungarian soil. However, in his first turbulent months in office Burián was faced with the loss of the fortress Przemyśl in March and the Gallipoli landings in April; and when Italy, enticed by Entente promises of extensive gains, called his bluff and declared war May 1915, the Monarchy was fighting on three fronts.

The failure of Burián's unyielding line against Rome did not, however, alter his behaviour towards Romania, whose demands he continued to reject. This exasperated the Germans²⁷ and even his benefactor Tisza, who believed that a Romanian attack would "automatically" follow an Italian one. Such a fourth front would lead to Italian, Romanian, and Serbian troops invading deep into Austrian and Hungarian territory, rendering any gains on the Russian front useless. Indeed, it would mean the "complete collapse" of the Monarchy, leading to its "dissolution".²⁸

Burián was not impressed by this gloomy talk; nor would he consent to the vast offers of territory to Bulgaria

26 Bridge: Österreich(-Ungarn) (see note 1), p. 344, original location is HHStA-PA-I, Forgách Aide Memoire, 10-Jan-1915.

27 Burián, Memorandum, 25.5.1915, HHStA, PA-I-503; also: REZL, 44.10.27.

28 Tisza to Burián, 1.5.1915, REZL, 44.11.28.

that Tisza and the Germans were demanding to secure Bulgaria's assistance.²⁹ Tisza insisted frantically that the “entire future depended” on holding the Balkan situation, mainly by using the Bulgarian link,³⁰ as this was the “only way to prevent the collapse in the Balkans”;³¹ but Burián was only prepared to make a few concessions to Bulgaria in the region of Macedonia, but nowhere else in the Balkans.

As regards Serbia, Burián's war aims, despite his initial hesitations, ended up becoming more extensive. Although when in late May 1915 the Germans suggested a separate peace with Serbia, Burián told Bethmann he was prepared to consider it, he was not thinking of an unconditional accommodation with Belgrade.³² Indeed, he ruled out a return to the status quo ante and insisted on Serbia's “humiliation”; his demands included border corrections, the cession of Macedonia to Bulgaria, and guarantees against Greater Serbian “machinations”. Bethmann, for his part, was dismayed, and complained that Burián was not prepared to offer any “tangible benefits” to Serbia in return for a separate peace, and only “highlighted” Serbia's “humiliation and diminution” as Austria-Hungary's war aims.³³

The positive implementation of war aims could only begin in earnest after the most serious losses were reversed. Although the AOK was able to hold back the larger Italian Army in the Alps, Serbia had still not been defeated and it took German assistance to turn the tide for Austria-Hungary in 1915. This came with the Battle of Gorlice-Tarnów (May to September), which brought the liberation of almost all Austro-Hungarian territory and pushed the Rus-

29 Tisza to Burián, 18.5.1915, REZL, 45/17.

30 Tisza to Burián, 23.5.1915, HHStA, PA-I-519.

31 Tisza to Burián, 18.5.1915, REZL, 45/17.

32 Burián, Memorandum, 25.5.1915, HHStA, PA-I-503; also: REZL, 44.10.27.

33 Ibid.

sians out of Congress Poland altogether. As the Dual Alliance successes against Russia grew, so did optimism about eventual victory in the Balkans; but with the ensuing march southwards Burián found himself facing strong adversarial challenges, from both Germany and Bulgaria, in the Monarchy's own historic backyard.

Despite the fierce fighting on the northern and then Italian fronts, Burián continued, and even developed further, Berchtold's policy of giving priority to the Balkans. At the same time, however, he had been installed in office in order to strengthen the Monarchy's prestige and establish its parity with Germany by driving a very hard bargain with Italy; and he was stubbornly determined not to cave in to pressure from Berlin or anywhere else. Although he ultimately failed to prevent Italian intervention, his approach only hardened vis-à-vis Romania; but whether he would be able to implement his Balkan war aims would depend on the defeat of Serbia, for which the Monarchy needed both German and Bulgarian assistance.

Phase II: Conquest and Occupation – October 1915 to January 1917

Austria-Hungary achieved its long desired goal of defeating Serbia and Montenegro in the winter of 1915. After the Gorlice-Tarnów offensive the Bulgarians concluded that the Central Powers were likely to win the war, and agreed to join them in exchange for Serbian Macedonia. The addition of Bulgarian troops was vital to achieving the fall of Serbia by engulfing it in a three-pronged pincer movement, creating widespread optimism in Vienna and Budapest: Serbia could at last be taught a "lesson" to satisfy "Austria-Hun-

gary's prestige".³⁴ (This, of course, ignored the fact that the Monarchy's successes had mainly been achieved thanks to German and Bulgarian assistance.) This section will analyse the internal and external pressures the Monarchy's leaders faced in determining and securing their war aims in these months of apparent success and what changed in their planning when the Brusilov Offensive once again put Austria-Hungary on the defensive.

The Future of the Balkans

With the retreat of Serbia's Army across Albania, military realities began to give the AOK a new, disproportionate voice in discussions on the future of the Balkans. Conrad, for example, now began an aggressive foray into influencing Austro-Hungarian war aims, which can be traced in the discussions between the MdÄ, AOK, and the Emperor within the military-bureaucratic framework of the *Militärkanzlei Seiner Majestät* (MKSM). In October 1915, in one of the earliest wartime examples of his annexationist views, Conrad advocated "potential territorial growth in Russia, Serbia, Montenegro, and Italy".³⁵ In November, in an extraordinary approach to the Emperor himself – who generally only communicated with his Foreign Minister about such matters – Conrad insisted that Serbia should not be restored as an independent state, which would only be an "agitation cauldron" which could reignite yet another "catastrophic war".³⁶ He recommended a simple solution: the complete annexation of both Montenegro and Serbia by the Monarchy; and dismissed as irrelevant the resulting increase in Austria-Hungary's Slavic component. Rejecting

34 Hohenlohe to Burián, 6.10.1915, HHStA, PA-I-952.

35 Conrad to Franz Joseph, 10.10.1915, Kriegsarchiv (= KA), Militärkanzlei Seiner Majestät (= MKSM), 1915 18-27, 25-1/5.

36 Conrad to Franz Joseph, 22.11.1915, KA, MKSM, 1915 18-27, 25-1/5.

the frontier modifications that had been mooted earlier, he argued that an “artificial construct” linked to Albania and including only Belgrade, the Mačva, and the Sandjak without wider annexations would leave the Monarchy with a disjointed and indefensible southern frontier that would inevitably lead to a “most serious conflict”.³⁷ The question was important, Conrad explained, because the Balkans represented the “most natural development region for the economic goals of the Monarchy”,³⁸ – in comparison with which the Polish question was secondary. His aims in the western Balkans were, therefore, to throw the Italians out, to avoid a protectorate over Albania by dismembering it, and to annex or at least perpetually occupy Montenegro and rump Serbia so as to keep Bulgaria in check. In short, for Conrad, the “final delineation and stabilisation” of Austria-Hungary’s Balkan aims and borders represented of all political and military questions the “most vital of the vital questions”,³⁹ and to allow even a small Serbia to survive would mean that despite its military victory “the Monarchy would have to consider the war a defeat”.⁴⁰

Conrad’s plans and recommendations stood in sharp contrast to Tisza’s. Essentially, the Hungarian Prime Minister wanted the Monarchy to reserve the exploitation of rump Serbia for itself while keeping Germany and Bulgaria out. Burián was of similar mind: Serbia was a “border land” in the “most immediate sphere of interest” of the Monarchy, and therefore its occupied regions had to be exclusively under the control of an Austro-Hungarian military and civilian administration.⁴¹ However, while no one in the Monarchy wanted to share the Austrian half of the

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Conrad to Burián, 25.12.1915, KA, MKSM, 1915 18-27, 25-1/5.

41 Burián to Thurn, 7.11.1915, HHStA, PA-I-973; also: REZL, 45/15.

Austro-Bulgarian partition of Serbia with Germany, Tisza could not afford to see it annexed to the Monarchy. He was worried – unlike the cavalier Conrad – that annexation would eventually mean political power for the southern Slavs which could overwhelm the Dualist configuration of the Monarchy. Hence, Tisza desired to keep the majority of Serbs out of the Monarchy and to segregate them in the newly incorporated border regions from rump Serbia.⁴² The means to do this would be a lengthy transition period during which the newly acquired border territories would be governed autocratically, while the Monarchy implemented a “generous colonisation of Hungarian and German elements”.⁴³ This new “patriotic majority” would form a wedge between the Serbian rump state and the Serbian population of Slavonia and south Hungary. In an analogous fashion, Tisza wanted to see a “systematic augmentation” of Hungarian and German towns in Sirmia, Bacska, and the Banat as a barrier to protect the southern border of the Monarchy from without and repress the Serbian minority within.⁴⁴ He therefore advocated a Hungarian annexation of the Mačva, followed by an “intensive colonisation” of reliable Hungarian and German farmers in order to create a wedge between the Serbs inside and those outside the Monarchy. In this way, Tisza hoped, Belgrade would sink to the level of a Hungarian provincial town and cease to be the focus for South Slav nationalism.⁴⁵ Placing his premiership on the line, Tisza threatened to resign if his colleagues and the Emperor decided to annex rump Serbia; and certainly he, above all others, deplored the idea of extensive territorial growth by

42 Tisza to Franz Joseph, 4.12.1915, REZL, 44.14.31; also: REZL, 44.9.25.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Miklós Komjáthy (ed.): *Protokolle des Gemeinsamen Ministerrates der Österreichisch-Ungarischen Monarchie, 1914–1918*. Budapest 1966, p. 365.

the Monarchy. Yet his own solution (tantamount to demographic rearrangement similar to the German “*Grenzstreifen* concept” in Poland) was at its core also both an expansionist and aggressive policy; Tisza even recognised that Russia would remain an enemy as a result. He believed, however that this was the only acceptable solution, and that the best chance for an honourable peace lay in leaving at least a portion of Serbia intact.⁴⁶

It was Burián who applied the brakes to both Conrad’s and Tisza’s extravagant ideas – although his own policies, while more moderate than theirs, could still hardly be considered modest. For example, he wanted territorial changes in the Balkan peninsula and elsewhere to provide for the “greatest possible increase in power and security” for Austria-Hungary,⁴⁷ neutralising Serbian-Russian agitation⁴⁸ and ensuring that in some form or another Serbia and Montenegro would fall under Austria-Hungary’s “political, military, and economic rule”.⁴⁹ True, while he assured Tisza that he regarded Austrian and Hungarian security as indivisible,⁵⁰ and promised Conrad that he would work for some, but not all, the annexations the AOK was demanding, he refused to endorse their wilder plans for “radical territorial reorganisation”.⁵¹ It was not that Burián was opposed in principle to annexing Serbian territory, or to expanding his Balkan war aims; but he was unwilling on the one hand to sell himself short by committing himself too early, or on the other to commit himself to annexations

46 Tisza to Franz Joseph, 4.12.1915, REZL, 44.14.31; also: REZL, 44.9.25.

47 Burián to Conrad, 25.12.1915, HHStA, PA-I-499; also cited in: Fritz Fischer: *Griff nach der Weltmacht. Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914/18*. Düsseldorf 1967, p. 396.

48 Conrad to Burián, 21.12.1915, REZL, 44.14.31; Burián’s comments, quoted by Conrad.

49 Conrad to Burián, 25.12.1915, KA, MKSM, 1915 18-27, 25-1/5.

50 Burián to Tisza, 10.12.1915, REZL, 44.3.3.

51 Burián to Conrad, 10.12.1915, HHStA, PA-I-499; also: Burián to Tisza, 10.12.1915, REZL, 44.3.3.

which might prevent an honourable peace. Even so, he was of one mind with both Conrad and Tisza over a quite impressive programme of war aims: Montenegro must lose its coastline, including Mount Lovćen which threatened the Austro-Hungarian naval base at Catarro, and some northern territory to the Monarchy, and territory to Albania, while Serbia must lose Belgrade, the Mačva, and the territory promised to Bulgaria.⁵² Albania would become an Austro-Hungarian protectorate, while Poland was to be kept away from Germany and “affiliated” with the Monarchy. Tisza also pushed for his ‘Poland for Austria, Serbia for Hungary’ plan, which he considered the “most important question”.⁵³

The final GMR to settle this debate took no decisions in detail about Serbia, allowing for maximum flexibility, but it agreed that any territory annexed by the Monarchy would go to Hungary.⁵⁴ Some later writers have erroneously interpreted this as a GMR decision for the outright annexation of Serbia,⁵⁵ but according to statements from diplomats at the time this was clearly not the case; although Burián admitted in his diary that he personally preferred to annex Serbia,⁵⁶ he was more pragmatic in discussions at the GMR. In fact, although there would be three more GMRs under Burián’s auspices in 1916, none of them raised the issue of war aims again. Burián therefore was left with a free hand to determine war aims policy, and he exercised it immediately. At the end of January 1916 he told his top negotiator that the discussions with Montenegro would be “less about negotiating, than about dictating Austria-Hungary’s peace conditions”⁵⁷ and this Diktat included the cession of Montenegro’s coastline,

52 Ibid.

53 Komjáthy (ed.): Protokolle (see note 44), 4.1.1916, p. 363.

54 Ibid., p. 374.

55 Fischer: Griff (see note 46), p. 397.

56 Burián Napló (see note 24), p. 167.

57 Burián to Otto, 19.1.1916, HHStA, PA-I-953k.

the Lovćen plateau, other militarily vital areas, and domestic policing and customs control.⁵⁸ Although Burián believed these terms would create a strong position for the Monarchy in Montenegro – a “life and death question”⁵⁹ – they satisfied neither Conrad (who felt they were too lenient)⁶⁰ nor the Germans (who felt it was too harsh).⁶¹ There were similar controversial debates about Albania, which Burián wished to treat as a protectorate and expand Austria-Hungary’s influence right down the eastern Adriatic and into the Mediterranean.⁶² Here too, however, despite pressures from internal and external stakeholders, Burián stood firm and the MdÄ continued to pursue the war aims he had laid down.

The Austro-Bulgarian Clash

Perhaps the strongest evidence of Austria-Hungary’s willingness to resist any encroachment on its sphere of interest came from its confrontations with Bulgaria over Serbia early in 1916. Indeed, a diplomatic and military clash over Kosovo nearly caused a fatal unravelling of the Quadruple Alliance. For while Burián, in his determination to keep his hands free, was refusing to clarify his intentions regarding Kosovo and other regions of Serbia which did not fall on the Bulgarian side of the agreed treaty line, the Bulgarians began to advance into this territory, provoking both Conrad and Burián to respond in a manner which was harsh even by their standards.

58 Burián to Conrad, 20.1.1916, HHStA, PA-I-953k; also: REZL, 45/16.

59 Burián to Fürstenberg, 22.1.1916, HHStA, PA-I-954p; also: REZL, 45/16.

60 AOK to Burián, 22.1.1916, HHStA, PA-I-953k.

61 Tschirschky to Jagow, 22.1.1916, National Archives Records Administration, USA (= NARA), PG-1117, SA (T-136).

62 Marvin B. Fried: The Cornerstone of Balkan Power Projection. Austro-Hungarian War Aims and the Problem of Albanian Neutrality, 1914–1918. In: *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 23 (2012) 3, pp. 425–445.

True, the German Foreign Ministry disapproved of Bulgaria's encroachments west of the treaty line,⁶³ and Burián managed to use this to obtain Berlin's support for his planned protectorate over a greater Albania, which was to include Kosovo.⁶⁴ He even got the Turks (never keen to see Muslims consigned to Slav rule) to support his project.⁶⁵ The Bulgarians, however, continued to attach “very great importance”⁶⁶ to annexing Pristina and Prizren in Kosovo, which fell on the Austrian side of the treaty border but where they had already installed civilian administrators. Torn between their allies, the Germans were perplexed and divided: on the one hand, Kaiser Wilhelm repeatedly urged Tsar Ferdinand to accept “the independence of Albania under Austrian protection”.⁶⁷ (According to Fischer, the Germans were beginning to fear for their fair share of the “spoils of war”,⁶⁸ and Berlin may have been hoping that German support for an Austro-Hungarian success in the Balkans might sugar the pill of a German rejection of the Austro-Polish solution.) However, while the German Foreign Ministry supported Burián, the German High Command supported Sofia.

In this situation, the Bulgarians were unimpressed by equivocal advice from Berlin and continued to maintain their civilian administrators in Pristina, Prizren, and elsewhere in Kosovo. The first actual confrontation with the Aus-

63 Jagow to Treutler, 31.1.1916, NARA, UM-3/1-297.

64 Burián to Hohenlohe, 2.2.1916, HHStA, PA-I-1007; also Hohenlohe to Jagow, 5.2.1916, NARA, UM-3/1-297.

65 Tschirschky to Bethmann-Hollweg, 13.2.1916, NARA, PG-1117, SA (T-136).

66 Jagow to Treutler, 11.3.1916, NARA, FT 5004 (T-120,2522); also: NARA, UM-3/1-297.

67 Jagow to Falkenhayn, 19.2.1916, NARA, FT 5004 (T-120,2522) E285613-748.

68 Fischer: Griff (see note 46), p. 288.

trians occurred on 27 February 1916, when an Austro-Hungarian unit was prevented by Bulgarian troops from entering Kazanik in southern Kosovo, whereupon Conrad immediately halted all deliveries of war supplies to the Bulgarians.⁶⁹ In Berlin, Foreign Secretary Jagow was extremely alarmed lest independent actions by the Bulgarian and Austro-Hungarian High Commands might result in further clashes; he supported Burián's recommendation (made rather contrary to Conrad's wishes) to ask the German General August von Mackensen to mediate. Burián, meanwhile, firmly reminded Tsar Ferdinand that "west of the treaty border began the Austro-Hungarian sphere of interest" and insisted to Jagow that it was only due to the "cool heads" of the AOK that more serious incidents had not taken place.⁷⁰ Although, when Vienna ordered the withdrawal of its forces from the area, the situation had returned to "approximately the status quo ante,"⁷¹ the Austrians still refused to permit the Bulgarians to administer Kazanik and left their troops in Pristina and Prizren to keep an eye on the Bulgarians and demonstrate the Monarchy's continuing interest in the area.

With regard to Bulgaria's future activities, Burián planned to continue friendly negotiations,⁷² while at the same time supporting the AOK in its negotiations, under German auspices, with its Bulgarian counterpart.⁷³ Unfortunately for Conrad, however, German good offices did not make much difference on the ground. On 7 March the AOK learned of a written Bulgarian order prohibiting all further requisitioning by Austro-Hungarian troops in Pristina and Prizren, prompting AOK protests. Clearly incensed but

69 Treutler to Jagow, 1.1.1916, NARA, FS-UM-134 (T-137) 1-156.

70 Jagow to Treutler, 3.3.1916, NARA, FS-UM-134 (T-137) 1-156.

71 Jagow to Treutler, 2.3.1916, NARA, FS-UM-134 (T-137) 1-156.

72 Jagow to Treutler, 5.3.1916, NARA, FT 5004 (T-120,2522).

73 Burián to Thurn/Tarnowski, 5.3.1916, REZL, 45/16.

aware that the Monarchy was currently too weak to “defend its rights with military means of coercion”, Conrad proceeded to ask Burián for more diplomatic support against these “ever larger and more alarming violations”:⁷⁴ Bulgaria must agree to a partition of the Pristina-Prizren region, recognise Austria-Hungary’s exclusive military authority in north Albania and all of Montenegro, and retreat from Djakovova.⁷⁵ This episode opened a second Austro-Bulgarian crisis – at alliance level. Burián supported Conrad’s demands,⁷⁶ but his repeated pleas to the Bulgarians for restraint in the matter of civilian administration fell on deaf ears,⁷⁷ his compromise suggestion of a joint Austro-Hungarian-Bulgarian military commission to control Pristina-Prizren was rejected by Conrad.⁷⁸ The Bulgarians, for their part, felt they had the right to install civilian administrators in any territory they conquered; and Vienna was afraid that they would never be willing to part with such territories.⁷⁹ Even Tisza, who badly needed the Bulgarian goodwill to keep Romania in check, roundly condemned their “exorbitant greed”.⁸⁰ On 18 March Sofia formally demanded that Prizren, Pristina, and Elbassan remain under their Bulgarian civilian administrations. Jagow considered this plan both fair and beneficial to Germany, since otherwise “a serious conflict with Vienna” could result, which must be avoided “at all costs”.⁸¹ However, Burián’s “brusque”⁸² rejection of it made Jagow fear that Bulgaria might defect from the alliance – a nightmarish prospect in-

74 Thurn to Burián, 7.3.1916, REZL, 45/16.

75 Burián to Tarnowski, 8.3.1916, REZL, 45/16.

76 Burián to Conrad, 10.3.1916, REZL, 45/16.

77 Burián to Tarnowski, 8.3.1916, REZL, 45/16.

78 Ibid.

79 Oberndorff to Jagow, 15.3.1916, NARA, UM-3/1-297.

80 Tisza to Tarnowski, 18.3.1916, REZL, 44b.8.6.

81 Jagow to Treutler/Oberndorff, 18.3.1916, NARA, UM-135/777-795.

82 Oberndorff to Jagow, 23.3.1916, NARA, UM-135/777-795.

deed, given that “the bloc whose coalition first goes to pieces” would be doomed to lose the war.⁸³

Meanwhile, the situation on the spot again became precarious. By 23 March the Bulgarian administration in Djakova (Montenegro) was using force to prevent the population from following the directives of the local Austro-Hungarian commanders.⁸⁴ Conrad warned the Bulgarian High Command that unless the local Bulgarian commander abstained from meddling with the Austro-Hungarian administration, a “conflict with Austro-Hungarian troops” would be “inevitable”.⁸⁵ In the event, although the Bulgarians continued to station troops in Kosovo, on 25 March they sealed off the treaty border, thereby formally designating it, in effect, as the “new Bulgarian national border”.⁸⁶ This move was actually welcome to Conrad – hence his decision, abandoning his previous intransigent attitude, to recall an Austrian battalion deployed on the Bulgarian side of the treaty border: for this gave him the opportunity to summon the Bulgarians to withdraw their units stationed on the Austro-Hungarian side of the treaty border, namely in Pristina-Prizren, Djakova, and Elbassan.⁸⁷

The Chief of the German General Staff, Erich von Falkenhayn, attempted to broker a temporary agreement whereby both sides would withdraw their military forces from the disputed towns;⁸⁸ but Burián was in no mood to accept even this proposal, let alone what he termed “unjustified Bulgarian claims” on Pristina-Prizren; and he was pleased to see that the AOK had redeployed troops there to enforce Aus-

83 Jagow to Oberndorff, 25.3.1916, NARA, UM-135/777-795.

84 Wiesner to Burián, 24.3.1916, REZL, 45/16.

85 Ibid.

86 Thurn to Burián, 25.3.1916, REZL, 45/16.

87 Ibid.

88 Oberndorff to Jagow, 28.3.1916, NARA, UM-135/777-795.

tria's wishes.⁸⁹ Apparently, Sofia regarded Serbian territory west of the treaty border as fair game because the Austrians had not laid claim to anything beyond a Belgrade bridgehead and the Mačva.⁹⁰ Conrad therefore urged Burián and the MKSM to make it clear once and for all that “formerly Serbian territory west of the treaty border remains reserved exclusively under Austro-Hungarian dominion.”⁹¹

The crisis was suddenly defused on 27 March when the AOK – in accordance with Conrad's wishes and contrary to Burián's stated position on the matter – provisionally vacated the Pristina-Prizren area in exchange for the Bulgarians doing the same in Djakova and Elbassan.⁹² The agreement was made without informing Berlin or Pless beforehand,⁹³ but at least it met with the approval of the Bulgarian Tsar Ferdinand.⁹⁴ Burián, frustrated in his hopes of removing the Bulgarian civilian administration from Pristina-Prizren, attempted at first to plead ignorance of the military deal.⁹⁵ In the end, however, he was forced to accept what he termed the AOK's “military provisional arrangement”, although it had been made “against the objections of the MdÄ”. Burián rejected Conrad's charge that it had been his failings that had whetted Bulgarian appetites for Kosovo in the first place, and pointed out that the MdÄ had repeatedly informed Sofia that the area to the west of the treaty border was “an Austro-Hungarian sphere of interest.”⁹⁶ In the end, Burián and Jagow would have to work hard to insist on the temporary status of the military agreement over Priz-

89 Burián to Wiesner, 25.3.1916, REZL, 45/16.

90 Conrad to Burián, 25.3.1916, REZL, 45/16.

91 Ibid.; also Treutler to Jagow, 28.3.1916, NARA, FT 5004 (T-120,2522).

92 Burián to Hohenlohe/Kral/Tarnowski, 27.3.1916, REZL, 45/16.

93 Oberndorff to Jagow, 29.3.1916, NARA, UM-135/777-795.

94 Treutler to Jagow, 28.3.1916, NARA, FT 5004 (T-120,2522).

95 Burián to Hohenlohe/Kral/Tarnowski, 27.3.1916, REZL, 45/16.

96 Burián to Conrad, 28.3.1916, REZL, 45/16.

ren-Pristina, and that the Austrian government “fully maintained its demands” on Kosovo⁹⁷ – despite the “vehement lamentations” of Tsar Ferdinand who had clearly hoped the issue had been settled permanently in his favour.⁹⁸ In the summer of 1916, however, all these questions were pushed into the background as the Monarchy once again faced an existential threat emanating from Russia.

The Brusilov Offensive

The success of the Gorlice-Tarnów offensive in Poland and Bulgaria’s intervention in the Balkans marked the high point of Austria-Hungary’s hopes of achieving its war aims in both regions. In the south, Austria-Hungary had established occupation regimes in Serbia, Montenegro, and half of Albania, while in the north it controlled roughly a third of Congress Poland from Lublin. Once the Brusilov Offensive started in June 1916, however, followed by the hostile Romanian intervention in August, the Monarchy was no longer able to fight independently and had to rely henceforth on its powerful German ally. It was only with German assistance that these offensives had been halted (with staggering losses in the Russian case); the weakening of Austria-Hungary’s diplomatic position as a result of these military embarrassments was bound to undermine its ability to pursue and achieve its own war aims. Out of the victory over Romania, for example, the Monarchy achieved only limited gains (albeit including the dock of Turn-Severin, Romania’s “largest and most efficient dockyard”⁹⁹ indispensable for the control of the Iron Gates); but for the rest – valuable resources and services such as Danube transport,

97 Oberndorff to Jagow, 9.4.1916, NARA, FT 5004 (T-120,2522).

98 Ibid.

99 Conrad to Czernin, 17.1.1917, HHStA, PA-I-1043.

food reserves, industry, and agriculture – the Germans slowly and steadily appropriated for themselves.

Although Tisza had made it clear that “securing Austro-Hungarian interests in the Balkans was a principal axiom” of the Monarchy’s policy,¹⁰⁰ Vienna now found its allies encroaching more and more on its most vital spheres of interest: Bulgaria, for example, her eyes still “peering towards the Adriatic”,¹⁰¹ continued to create tension in the western Balkans. Perhaps even more worrying, in power-political terms, the Germans seemed have set their sights on the Albanian port of Valona. In a top-secret memorandum for Bethmann Hollweg in November 1916 recommending the establishment of a Mediterranean naval base in Albania, Admiral Henning von Holtzendorff declared straight out that Valona “must become German”.¹⁰² Meanwhile, the Germans were interfering with Austro-Hungarian planning in other areas, such as Montenegro and Serbia.

In a discussion of war aims on 15 November 1916, Burián attempted to counter German demands, protect Austria-Hungary’s conquests, and secure conditions for peace. He failed, and the weakness of his position was demonstrated when he was forced to sacrifice almost all interests relating to Albania and the western Slavs. The Germans rejected an Austrian annexation of Montenegro, pressing instead for the union of Montenegro with Serbia.¹⁰³ Only on one point was Burián able to resist with a categorical refusal: the idea of allowing a Serbian port in the Adriatic at the expense of Albania. This, he said, would give Serbia’s prestige such a

100 Komjáthy (ed.): *Protokolle* (see note 44), 12.1.1917, p. 447.

101 Wedelto Zimmerman, 10.12.1916, NARA, T-120-1498-D627063-627714.

102 Holtzendorff to Auswärtiges Amt, 26.11.1916, NARA, T-120-1498-D627063-627714.

103 Burián, Memorandum, 15.11.1916, HHStA, PA-I-524; also: Burián, Memorandum, 20.11. 1916, REZL, 45/15.

boost that Vienna would “really have to ask itself why it was fighting this war”.¹⁰⁴ For the rest, his hopes of putting forward a peace “without relinquishing vital interests”¹⁰⁵ were dashed in the face of German resistance.

As regards Poland, the military disasters of the summer at last forced Burián, under pressure from Tisza and Stürgkh, to give up the Austro-Polish solution, as the Germans were demanding; but he still continued to demand complete parity with Germany in Poland.¹⁰⁶ From July, however, the Germans were pressing the Austrians hard to accept a subordinate role in Poland, arguing that a German-controlled Poland would be a “kind of parallel to the ‘Balkans’ for Austria-Hungary”.¹⁰⁷ Burián, for his part, refused to equate the two and played down Austria-Hungary’s future role in the Balkans in order to achieve parity in the Polish question, which, he reminded Berlin, was “politically, militarily, and economically” the Dual Alliance’s “most important joint accomplishment”.¹⁰⁸ Besides, he argued, control of Courland and Lithuania would be a greater gain for Germany than Serbia, Montenegro and Albania put together would be for Austria-Hungary.¹⁰⁹ In short, Burián was attempting to treat the Balkans as non-negotiable with the Germans, just as Berlin would never allow Vienna a voice in Baltic

104 Burián, Aide Memoire, 15.11.1916, HHStA, PA-I-524.

105 Bridge: Österreich(-Ungarn) (see note 1), p. 353; Bridge cites Burián to Bethmann, 18.10.1916 in: André Scherer/Jacques Grunewald (eds.): *L'Allemagne et les problèmes de la paix pendant la première guerre mondiale. Documents extraits des archives de l'Office allemande des affaires étrangères. Vol. 1: Des origines à la déclaration de la guerre sous-marine à outrance. Août 1914–31 janvier 1917.* Paris 1962, p. 517.

106 Shanafelt: *Secret Enemy* (see note 21), p. 89.

107 Burián to Hohenlohe, 4.7.1916, HHStA, PA-I-501; also REZL, 45/17.

108 Ibid.

109 Ibid.

affairs. The key difference was, of course, that Germany was helping to win a war in the Balkans which Austria-Hungary could not manage alone; but Burián continued to hanker after ensuring parity in Poland to justify Austria-Hungary's sacrifices there, while demanding for the Monarchy exclusive control over as much of the Balkans as possible. Ultimately, the decision to establish Poland as a constitutional monarchy under the joint control of the Central Powers was made in August, and finalised at Pless in October. A Polish “Condominium” was duly proclaimed on 5 November 1916, but the question of who would in fact control it remained open. At any rate, despite Burián's earlier insistence that “conquest of Poland had not been a war aim”,¹¹⁰ he was still hoping somehow to draw the territory into the Monarchy's sphere of influence. Indeed, if the flame of Austro-Hungarian expansionism had flickered temporarily with the military setbacks of the summer of 1916, it had by no means been extinguished – as the final section of this chapter will show.

Phase III: Hunger and Decline – January 1917 to October 1918

The final phase of the development of Austria-Hungary's war aims testified to an irreversible decline in its power that inevitably diminished its ability to achieve its goals. Although the Monarchy was to fight on for almost two years after the death of Emperor Franz Joseph, the focus of the new leadership was less immediately concerned with achieving offensive goals than with heading off starvation, revolution, and dissolution. Even so, it is striking that both

110 Komjáthy (ed.): Protokolle (see note 44), p. 290.

the new Emperor Karl I and his Foreign Minister Ottokar Count Czernin von und zu Chudenitz clung to the belief that an honourable peace must still include territorial conquest and economic domination and that despite the Monarchy's obviously declining importance, Berlin still had to pay at least lip service to Vienna's daydreaming.

Peace as Cover for Conquest

In this last phase of the war, when hunger became the most pressing issue facing the Monarchy, Karl and Czernin began to encounter stiff resistance from an establishment unwilling to settle for simply making peace. Although Karl managed to remove his most troublesome opponents in the form of Burián, Conrad, and eventually Tisza by mid-1917, other diplomats and soldiers stepped in to defend what they perceived to be the Monarchy's interests from the young Emperor and his crafty Foreign Minister.

It should be noted, however, that even Karl was not prepared to settle for peace on absolutely any terms. Although he was prepared to make compromises to secure the Monarchy's more important accomplishments – for example, to allow Serbia to survive provided his “principal war aim”, maintaining the Monarchy's integrity, was assured¹¹¹ – he nevertheless sanctioned an accord signed by Czernin and Bethmann in March 1917 setting out the maximum and minimum war aims of the Central Powers. According to the minimum programme, their armies would only withdraw from Russia, Montenegro, Serbia, Albania, and Romania only if the status quo ante bellum were restored in the east and the west. The maximum programme provided for expansion “in the east” for Germany and in Romania for

111 Komjáthy (ed.): Protokolle (see note 44), 12.1.1917, p. 451.

the Monarchy;¹¹² although the actual extent of these annexations would depend on the ultimate diplomatic position on the “performances/achievements” of each of the allies (which implied that Germany would receive the lion’s share).¹¹³

Ostensibly, Czernin only wished to talk about peace, and he even endorsed Woodrow Wilson’s plans for disarmament, international arbitration, and a League of Nations. In reality, however, his desire for expansion in the Balkans remained as strong as ever, although he kept other parties in the dark about it.¹¹⁴ From Bethmann he demanded no less than complete “parity with Germany in economic and territorial questions”, with no Balkan or Russian (i.e. Polish) territory being returned until the occupied portions of the Monarchy had been returned.¹¹⁵ By demonstratively aligning himself with peace parties such as the Meinel Group, he sought to prove that Austria-Hungary was not “fighting a war of conquest”;¹¹⁶ but secretly he wanted to “arrange” a number of Balkan questions “according to Austria-Hungary’s wishes”,¹¹⁷ calculating that the Entente would turn a blind eye rather than to allow the entire peace negotiations to fail. In Montenegro, for example, he sought to create a “kind of *fait accompli*”¹¹⁸ by annexing the entire Lovćen outright, together with enough of the coastline to create a connection with Albania;¹¹⁹ Such plans were consistent with previous Austro-Hungarian war aims, and Czernin was willing to mask his true intentions to achieve them.

112 Czernin to Bethmann-Hollweg, Agreement, 27.3.1917, HHStA, PA-I-524; also: NARA, T-120-1498-D627063-627714.

113 Ibid.

114 Arz to MdÄ, 6.10.1917, KA, AOK-Fasz-3483, MV-165.044.

115 Czernin, Memorandum, 16.3.1917, HHStA, PA-I-504.

116 Czernin to Otto, 18.8.1917, HHStA, PA-I-1074.

117 Ibid.

118 Czernin to Otto, Secret Annex, 18.8.1917, HHStA, PA-I-1074.

119 Ibid.

The Germans, by contrast, felt no such compunction, as the High Command began to ignore Austria-Hungary's wishes and sought to control not only vast territories in the east and the west, but the Dual Monarchy itself.

Poland, Ukraine, and Brest-Litovsk

Amidst all the talk of war aims, the conclusion of a peace that would secure the food supply – “the most burning question of the whole war”¹²⁰ – was beginning to replace territorial expansion as Monarchy's primary objective. As the threat of starvation and of infection by the Russian revolution intensified the emperor's desire for a speedy peace, Czernin took unprecedented steps to persuade Germany to give ground in the west. He even offered to hand over all of Austrian-occupied Poland, and even Galicia, the Monarchy's largest crown territory and Austrian since 1815, to a Polish state that would be controlled from Berlin. This offer, endorsed by the AOK in July 1917, was made in the hope of obtaining grain supplies from Romania (where the Germans were still in control) and the Ukraine;¹²¹ and it showed that the AOK was no less prepared than Czernin to cede Austrian territory provided that as part of a final peace the population of the Monarchy would be fed, its Hungarian territory enlarged, and its Balkan acquisitions secured.

This was Czernin's policy at the Brest-Litovsk peace conference, where, in an attempt to secure grain supplies from the new Ukrainian government in exchange for the cession of the Cholm district of Galicia, he signed the so-called “Bread Peace” with the Ukraine on 9 February 1918. In the event, however, the Monarchy received no grain ow-

120 Czernin to Hohenlohe, 23.4.1917, as cited in: Shanafelt: *Secret Enemy* (see note 21), p. 140.

121 Kuhn to Burian, Belgrade, 22.7.1917, HHStA, PA-I-973.

ing to the chaos prevailing in Kiev; while the cession of the Cholm so infuriated the Poles that any future ‘Austro-Polish’ solution or similar method of controlling Poland indirectly was destroyed forever. Despite Karl’s attempts to backtrack, proposing to Berlin the creation of a Poland “as satisfied and untrimmed as possible”,¹²² the damage had been done. Even the Poles of Galicia now broke with the government in Vienna; and by the autumn all talk of resolving the Polish question by some form of association with Austria-Hungary, even with German consent, had come to nothing as Austria-Hungary was itself being torn apart.

Daydreaming amid Collapse

In some respects, things seemed to look good in the summer of 1918. Austria-Hungary had achieved most of its offensive war aims: Russia had been defeated and forced to accept peace on terms that even Czernin thought excessively draconian, Ukraine was a possible future grain supplier and buffer-state, and despite estranging Poles at home and abroad the Monarchy retained its Lublin occupation zone and therefore a say in the area. In Romania, the threat from irredentist expansionism had been crushed while the Monarchy won key border rectifications, an annexation of the Iron Gates, and a one-third stake in the state oil monopoly – although Germany secured near total control of the infrastructure. In the Balkans, its territorial “backyard”, Vienna had successfully fended off a series of German and Bulgarian threats to its occupation zones in Serbia, Montenegro, and Albania. Finally, the Monarchy’s most despised enemy, Italy, had nearly collapsed after Caporetto and in spite of

122 Ungron Report, 6.4.1918, HHStA, PA-I-1039 Liasse 56/30, as cited in: Höbelt: *Austropolnische Lösung* (see note 15), p. 9.

Allied assistance was no longer the threat it had once been. Perhaps most important of all, the territorial integrity of the Monarchy had been restored, as foreign forces had been evicted from all of its lands and its armies stood without exception on enemy territory.

Yet this impressive scenario was to a large extent, if not utterly, vitiated by a number of facts on the ground: at home, the Monarchy was grappling with rampant hunger, constant strikes, the very real threat of a Bolshevik-style revolution; abroad with political and military subordination to Germany, and the physical exhaustion of its armed forces. This being the case, Austria-Hungary's ambitious programme of war aims, which had always contained surreal elements, could now only be described as daydreaming. Changes at the top – with the Sixtus affair in April 1918 undermining the emperor's credibility and precipitating the resignation of Czernin and the return of Burián to the Ballhausplatz – did nothing to remedy the situation. On the contrary, voices now gained a hearing that were even more remote from reality.

In the summer of 1918 the Chief of the General Staff Arz von Straussenburg, who initially after his elevation in Conrad's place had been far less aggressive and involved in political questions than his predecessor, suddenly developed a strong belief in the AOK's right to criticise the Foreign Ministry's allegedly feeble position on war aims. While the AOK was gearing up for what would turn out to be Austria-Hungary's last offensive in the war, on the Piave, Arz embarked on a discussion of the Balkans with Burián on 27 May. Arz pressed him to agree to the annexation of Albania,¹²³ but the

123 Trauttmansdorff to Burián, 27.5.1918, HHStA, PA-I-1007; also: Arz to Burián, 11.6.1918, AOK-Fasz-3543, MV-318.295, based on Helmut Schwanke: *Zur Geschichte der österreichisch-ungarischen Militärverwaltung in Albanien (1916–1918)*. Unpublished Ph.D. Diss. Wien 1982.

Foreign Minister objected that as even Italy had given up its Balkan colonialism for the principle of national self-determination, Vienna could not possibly revert to reactionary “annexationist tendencies”.¹²⁴ This did not satisfy Arz at all, who dismissed MdA attitudes as mere procrastination while Austria-Hungary’s last region of potential expansion slipped out of its control. Even as the material and psychological exhaustion of the Monarchy was threatening its collapse, the AOK persisted with its demands for annexations as if the war were being won on all fronts.

For example, while the OHL (*Oberste Heeresleitung*) suffered a major setback with the failure of its Champagne-Marne Offensive in July 1918, Arz himself was busily planning a counterattack in Albania set for 24 July. Indeed, on 21 July he sent Burián an extensive, and somewhat astonishing, memorandum on Austro-Hungarian war aims in the western Balkans, together with several elaborate maps detailing the division of territory in best-case to worst-case scenarios. Even his minimum war aims involved widespread annexations of Serbian and Montenegrin territory, however. Arz insisted that Austria-Hungary’s “war aims in the Balkans must be the complete incorporation” of both Serbia and Montenegro into the Monarchy;¹²⁵ for a victor had the right to determine the outcome of his victory, and Austria-Hungary was undoubtedly the “victor in the Balkans”. Of course, Arz might have said more about the fact that Bulgaria still maintained extensive claims right across the Balkans, that the Entente still held a so far impenetrable front from Valona to Salonika, and that Germany was slowly making itself dominant in Romania. In fact, he did warn that the strengthening of Bulgaria would be “tantamount”

124 Burián to Trauttmansdorff, 5.6.1918, HHStA, PA-I-1007.

125 Arz to Burián, 21.7.1918, HHStA, PA-I-500.

to a “hegemonic takeover” in the Balkans which would in turn mean the Monarchy’s “losing its hegemony” in the only area where it was still capable of exercising it. If Vienna were politically and economically rolled back in the Balkans, it would lose “all elbow-room” and would be forced into a new war to secure the territory it needed for its economic expansion.¹²⁶ In short, Arz had come to understand that only in the Balkans could Austria-Hungary hope to extract any territorial gains from what was a disastrous and costly war; although it has to be said that his faith in the Monarchy’s ability to survive and fight a future war was truly remarkable.

Aware that the MdÄ and the Hungarians would resist the wholesale incorporation of the western Balkans, Arz laid out the minimum military border rectifications necessary to protect Austro-Hungarian interests from “most serious damage” if an independent Montenegro and Serbia had to be created. Not that this was a very generous offer anyway: Arz remained committed to Austria-Hungary’s earliest war aims in the region – Mount Lovćen, the Sandjak, and Majdanpek mines – and the Montenegrin and Serbian capitals would both be annexed. Any territory whatever that was incorporated would have to be ruled militarily “for decades” to properly “educate” the populations.¹²⁷ Finally, Arz stressed the need for speedy action: after all, Austria-Hungary’s “unpreparedness” for peace negotiations had had very “detrimental consequences”, in the north-east and Poland and such mistakes must not be repeated in the Balkans. There, Austria-Hungary’s passivity would be exploited by the Bulgarians and the Germans, both of whom had interests that conflicted with the Monarchy’s and damaged its prestige.¹²⁸

126 Ibid.

127 Ibid.

128 Ibid.

In contrast to Arz, Burián remained level-headed enough to know the OHL's far-reaching plans could not be achieved. On 30 July he told Arz that he failed to understand the necessity of “transitioning to a policy of conquest”;¹²⁹ but even he was now prepared to admit that the vagueness that had characterised the MdA's policy since early 1915 could always be clarified to suit the military situation, and might well prove useful in securing the maximum gains for the Monarchy.

Germany as the Final Guarantor

Apart from fending off Arz, Burián had to contend with German attempts to deny Austria-Hungary a voice in the debate over northern questions. In a discussion with Chancellor Georg von Hertling and his Foreign Secretary Richard von Kühlmann on 11 June 1918, Burián returned to the Austro-Polish solution but was directed towards compensations in Romania, Serbia, and Montenegro. He replied that annexations of large swathes of territory in the latter two countries was “not part of Austria-Hungary's policy program”;¹³⁰ and that he personally, unlike the AOK and the Hungarians, was “decidedly opposed” to any annexations in Serbia whatsoever.¹³¹ In fact, all talk of the Monarchy's expanding further into Slav territory was fast becoming a pipedream, as before the month was out U.S. Secretary of State Robert Lansing had proclaimed Wilson's goal of liberating all branches of Slavs from German and Austro-Hungarian rule, and both France and Britain had rallied to his support. The Monarchy was now fighting for its

129 Burián to Arz, 30.7.1918, HHStA, PA-I-1007.

130 Burián Report of Hertling/Kühlmann talks, 11.6.–12.6.1918, HHS-tA, PA-I-505; also: HHStA, PA-I-536.

131 Ibid.

own survival, and though the Germans now gave way over Serbia, Montenegro, and Albania, they insisted on retaining Valona, together with control over petroleum, trains, and shipping.¹³² The fact that in return for these grudging concessions the Monarchy was pledged to go on fighting in Europe for German objectives as far away as the Crimea, Egypt, and Mesopotamia was further evidence Vienna was steadily falling into a condition of vassalage to Berlin.

By September 1918, when Burián met Kühlmann's successor Paul von Hintze in Vienna, it was clear that the war effort of the Central Powers was collapsing. What remained was to identify some minimal joint aims that could still be achieved. Yet even here there were differences of approach: while Burián was asking the Germans to guarantee what he still described as the Monarchy's "war aims",¹³³ it was significant that Hintze's handwritten record of the conversation referred only to common "peace goals".¹³⁴ According to Hintze, the two sides agreed on the following programme: Germany wanted its territorial integrity and the freedom of the seas, in return for renouncing annexations and granting independence to Belgium, to which it was prepared to pay compensation.¹³⁵ Burián also professed his commitment to the status quo ante, but at the same time went on to list a number of "small territorial expansions". These peace conditions included the Lovćen and a "border strip" in Romania.¹³⁶ Even at this late stage in the game, when not even Germany felt it could prosecute an effective war and was

132 Bridge: Österreich(-Ungarn) (see note 1), p. 363.

133 MdÄ, Notes of Burián/Hintze conference, 5.9.1918, HHStA, PA-I-524k.

134 Hintze, Handwritten Notes, 6.9.1918, NARA, T-120/1500.

135 Burián, Notes of private Hintze talks, 6.9.1918, HHStA, PA-I-524k; see also David Stevenson: *The First World War and International Politics*. Oxford 1988, p. 223.

136 Hintze, Handwritten Notes, 6.9.1918, NARA, T-120/1500.

prepared to accept the status quo ante bellum for the sake of an immediate peace, Burián tried to insist on Hintze's taking responsibility for Austria's expansionist war aims. Hence, although both men spoke of the need for common war aims, the talks ended without an agreement.

Hintze's evasive tactics only served to spur the Austrians into action. One day before Allied Balkan offensive of 15 September that would knock Bulgaria out of the war, Burián issued Karl's emotional public proclamation, calling on all belligerents, without ceasing military operations, to send official delegates to a neutral state to discuss terms of peace. Although he had gone behind the Germans' backs, he was after all only proposing a compromise, not a separate peace; but the initiative came to nothing anyway, being interpreted, as the Germans had warned, as a capitulation. After this, Vienna's voice ceased to matter in international circles.

By the end of September the Central Powers were collapsing on every front from Syria to the Somme, and after the Bulgarians requested a ceasefire, Ludendorff demanded an armistice at once, even before the Hindenburg line had been breached. In Berlin, the issue of war aims was put on hold, as the elite sought to contrive a revolution from above that would get them a peace on the basis of Wilson's Fourteen Points. The situation in Austria-Hungary was even more hopeless. On 27 September the AOK began its retreat from the Balkans.¹³⁷ The Bulgarian armistice of 29 September meant that Austria-Hungary could no longer hold Albania without being outflanked, and was probably going to be pushed out of Montenegro and Serbia too by the advancing Entente Army. By 10 October Burián's programme had been reduced to ensuring that Austria-Hungary received

137 Lejhanec to Burián, 27.9.1918, HHStA, PA-I-999.

the same treatment as Germany in any armistice.¹³⁸ He was now prepared to agree to everything: Serbian access to the sea, and the re-establishment of Montenegro, Albania, Serbia, and Romania. As for expansion, his only, final claim was for a small border rectification against Romania, which he insisted should not be regarded as an annexation.¹³⁹

It all came to nothing. Karl, Czernin, and Burián had tied the Monarchy to Berlin and were reduced to hoping that Germany might yet come to its rescue; but Germany herself was defeated and in no position to negotiate terms on behalf of Austria-Hungary with adversaries uninterested in any such a conversation. On 14 October came Burián's unilateral request for an armistice, followed by Karl's promise of a federalised Austria (though not Hungary). Lansing responded on 18 October stating that the Fourteen Points no longer applied to Austria-Hungary. All hopes of imperial gains were finally buried on the following day, when Burián acceded to a request by General Kövess to seek a ceasefire in the Balkans.¹⁴⁰ Five days later Burián resigned and Karl severed the alliance with Germany on 26 October, in the midst of the Battle of Vittorio Veneto, which ended in a defeat for Austria-Hungary and a separate peace by means of armistice on the Italian front. After the South Slavs, Czecho-Slovaks, and even Hungarians had all declared independence, Austria-Hungary ended not only its tragic involvement in the First World War but also its political existence; and the offensive goals that the government and military had wrangled over for more than four years of war disappeared along with them.

138 Burián to Trauttmansdorff, 10.10.1918, HHStA, PA-I-966.

139 Burián to Hohenlohe, 11.10.1918, HHStA, PA-I-966.

140 Burián to Trauttmansdorff, 19.10.1918, HHStA, PA-I-966.

Conclusion

Austria-Hungary's war aims were one of the reasons why its elites sought to continue fighting during the First World War, and they risked – fatally as it turned out – paying the ultimate price a state could pay, namely its existence. The evidence shows that extensive war aims were continually being developed and pursued in both the Balkans and in Poland; and it was to these areas that the elites looked to fulfil their political, economic, and military objectives in a post-war world.

The evidence has also shown that the political leadership in Vienna and Budapest managed, albeit sometimes not without a struggle, to retain control of decision-making and to keep both the military and its allies in check. Ultimately, the Monarchy failed in its endeavour, by pursuing offensive, expansionist war aims, to conquer, subjugate, or otherwise control the neighbouring states in order to preserve, even enhance, its Great Power status. Even so, its pursuit of them in the first place was clearly among the underlying causes of both the protracted conflict and what came after.