

Krisztián Csaplár-Degovics:

‘Bad Empire’ vs. ‘Good Empire’ – Concepts of Empire in the Debates of the Hungarian House of Representatives at the turn of the Century

Lectures at conferences dedicated on Habsburg Central Europe regularly provoke great academic debates over the concept of empire. Although Austria-Hungary was considered an empire in its time, and historians still refer to it as such, it is very difficult to define and describe exactly why this community of states can be regarded a real empire. Present lecture argues that relevant answers should be sought in unpublished and published Austro-Hungarian sources.

The Hungarian House of Representatives was the scene of a major political debate at the turn of the century, which lasted several years and focused on the Bosnia-Herzegovina policy of the joint finance minister, Benjámín Kállay (1900–1902). This debate appeared to have targeted about Kállay’s person and his governing practices; in reality, the Hungarian representatives were discussing the relationship of the Kingdom of Hungary and Hungarian nation(-building) to the phenomena of empire, imperialism and colonialism. The series of political attacks in question had strong parallels with the history of the impeachment trial of Warren Hastings in the British Parliament between 1788 and 1794.

Present lecture aims to narrate how the notions of ‘bad empire’ and ‘good empire’ had emerged in the debate between Hungarian government and opposition representatives. While the term ‘bad empire’ was used to refer to the unconstitutional Habsburg Empire and Austria prior to 1867, after the great Compromise the term ‘good empire’ was synonymous with constitutional Austria and constitutional Hungary. Moreover, present lecture strives to demonstrate that both the debate in the Hungarian House of Representatives and its press and scientific echoes had a strong European context.

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Competing Cis- and Transleithanian Historical Visions in the Kronprinzenwerk (1885-1902)

This talk is about Austro-Hungarian dualism in practice, in a space where the cultural and the political intersect. Stakeholders in the post-1867 imperial state – the main among them the ruling Habsburg dynasty – were in a constant hustle to keep pace with the myriads of shifting group loyalties its citizens could choose from based on linguistic-, cultural-, confessional-, class-, or ethnic heterogeneities. Against these centrifugal forces of difference, the Crown Prince Rudolf (1858-1889) and his working circle attempted to offer an alternative vision of imperial unity in diversity with the massive cultural project, the book series “The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in Words and Images”, or simply “Kronprinzenwerk”. But difference crept in here too early in the editorial process when the two working offices in Vienna and Budapest presented competing understandings as to how the state and its history should be represented in it. Blending the methodologies of cultural and intellectual history, using archival sources and the under-researched Hungarian language version of the Kronprinzenwerk, my question was: how did the cis- and transleithanian parts of the empire negotiate their contending state ideas and visions of history? To demonstrate, I will focus on what I call “The Zeissberg-affair”, the editorial conflict flaring up about the long historical essay on the Habsburg Monarchy written for the Kronprinzenwerk by Heinrich von Zeissberg and translated/reworked into Hungarian by Ignác Acsády. By analyzing the internal sources of the dispute and deep reading the two versions of the published text, through this example we can arrive at wider conclusions about what dualism meant for different participants in the state-making process and it can help us enter into the debate of why the Kingdom of Hungary seems such an “ill-fitting wheel” (Erika Szívós, 2019) for newer master narratives on the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

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“[T]he worst absolutism prevails”. The Austrian Delegation’s “Bosnia Debate” of 1906 as Political Discourse in the Late Habsburg Monarchy

In June and July 1906, imperial politicians and bureaucrats gathered in Vienna for the annual meeting of the Habsburg monarchy’s Austrian Delegation. Despite a lack of formal legislative authority, the delegation sessions were widely reported on in the press across Austria–Hungary providing participants with the opportunity to position themselves politically before the reading public. Debates about the monarchy’s occupation policy in Bosnia–Herzegovina provided ample material for their efforts. This paper examines how claims about the occupied territory were used to pursue political aims within Austria–Hungary by analysing the speeches given during the so-called “Bosnia Debate” on July 4–6, 1906. It focuses on how ideas about Bosnia–Herzegovina shaped the Habsburg monarchy, rather than on how imperial agents sought to culturally construct the occupation territory, which has been the primary focus of the literature to date. In so doing, this paper suggests a different interpretation of the relationship between the two polities.

Politicians and bureaucrats mobilized local events in the occupied territory as a way to debate how political power in Austria–Hungary more broadly should be organized. Throughout the discussions the Joint Minister of Finance asserted that the occupation administration’s handling of recent labour unrest in the territory demonstrated the benefits of bureaucratic rule. Radical nationalist politicians from Bohemia and Dalmatia, by contrast, used the same events to argue that the monarchy should be steered by elected and responsible representatives. Their claims on political power carried particular weight given the recent constitutional crisis between the Crown and the Hungarian opposition as well as attempts by New Course politicians in Dalmatia and Croatia–Slavonia to reorganize the monarchy. Political discourses about the occupied territory became the site for a broader critique of the entire Habsburg state. This observation suggests that the experience of administering Bosnia–Herzegovina had a greater impact on the domestic politics of Austria–Hungary than has typically been acknowledged.