

Count István Tisza and the Preservation of the Old Order*

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The first unsure though exhilarating movements of the national re-awakening in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Central-Eastern Europe and in the Balkans were very much like the first steps of infants who are painfully aware of their weakness and then compensate for it with cries of self-induced encouragement. In the history of nations, this dichotomy unfolds in the latent or open struggle between national anxiety and national self-exaltation. In Hungary's case, the former was fuelled by the consciousness of being a small nation, surrounded by a "sea" of aliens, Germans, Slavs, and Rumanians, and by Hungary's subordinate status in the Habsburg Empire; while the latter was thriving on the memories of a heroic historical past and on the exaggerated political and literary rhetoric of the present. Coexistence between these two opposites was hardly possible, and the efforts by the best among Hungarian statesmen were spent on finding a way out from this predicament.

Count István Széchenyi hoped to find a solution to this dichotomy in a close relationship with Austria, in tolerance of and understanding with the non-Magyar national minorities, and simultaneously, in the building of an economically and socially progressive Hungary. Such a solution would have quelled any anxiety stemming from the sense of being alone and surrounded, and it also would have satisfied national pride. However, the highly emotional content of Magyar national self-exaltation could hardly be pacified by such a rational approach, nor did a shortsighted Austrian policy make the realization of such a plan possible. The torch thus passed to Lajos Kossuth who harbored the illusion that Hungary could carve out a place for itself in the Danube-basin and could, by its example, attract

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all non-Magyar subjects of Hungary to the cause of liberty under Magyar leadership. The waning appeal and increasing hopelessness of the Széchenyi concept had to lead to Kossuth, but Kossuth's plan in turn had to end up in flames, in the total destruction of the short-lived Hungarian independence in 1848-1849.

Nevertheless, the abortive revolution did not happen in vain, because both the Hungarians and the Austrians learned from it. Ferenc Deák revived the Széchenyi plan in essence but combined it with the most significant achievement of 1848: the *de facto* independent Hungary under the protective umbrella of the Habsburg Empire. Emperor Francis Joseph came to accept the Deák concept once the war against Prussia was lost. He then considered it advisable to carry out an act of reconciliation, through a restoration of constitutionalism and a duplication of constitutional authority, with the most powerful non-German people in his Empire, the Magyars. The outcome of such an understanding resulted in the Compromise of 1867, which elevated Hungary to equal partnership with Austria.

Theoretically and ideally, the gap between apprehension and illusion was eliminated. Through its association with Austria, Hungary did become a great power, at least in its own estimation, a fact which should have served as a source for both self-assurance and pride. In reality, genuine self-assurance, through an elimination of fear and anxiety, never did come about. The excruciating awareness of being small in numbers and surrounded remained and so did the real and imaginary slights inflicted by the Austrian partner. Thus, behind a deceptively stable surface, the old dichotomy persisted. At the risk of ignoring crucial social and economic issues in a rapidly changing and industrializing society, the epigons of Széchenyi, Kossuth, and Deák kept spending their energies on either trying to prove that 1867 was the final solution, or challenging this view and working to undermine it.

As a minimum guarantee for Hungary's survival, the partnership with Austria was acknowledged by all. Ironically, even the Party of Independence, the so-called "48-ers," paid only lip-service to the ideas of Kossuth, who in his exile persisted stubbornly in defending not only 1848 but 1849, the dethronement of the Habsburgs and the establishment of a Hungarian republic. Instead of following Kossuth all the way, the 48-ers accepted the security offered by the 1867 Compromise, but tried simultaneously to dissociate Hungary further and further from Austria, thereby undermining the basic assumption of close cooperation upon which the 1867 Compromise was built. The absurdity of their paradoxical attitude came to light during their short reign in Hungary between 1906 and 1910, when they could not but govern in the old ways while pretending to be different, or as one

observer put it, "The whole coalition rule was like a circus performance, where the colored lamps had to be lit and turned in such a way that the audience should cherish the illusion that what was black was really white, and what was 67 was really 48."¹ Neither the 48-ers, nor the defenders of the Compromise, the 67-ers, indicated any serious concern about the nationalities question and the social conditions of the peasantry and the gradually emerging urban proletariat. However, social-political stagnation, as well as growing frustration in the wake of the resurgence of the post-coalition power of the 67-ers in the 1910's, drove at least the Justh-Károlyi faction of the 48-ers towards a genuinely more democratic stand, albeit not without a certain degree of ambivalence, particularly on the question of the non-Magyar national minorities. They hoped that universal suffrage would most likely bring to power a government in Hungary which would increasingly rely on the inner resources of the country along with a gradual and partial secession from Austria.

For the 67-ers, the Liberty or later the Party of National Work, the 1867 Compromise was not an act of convenience liable to change, but rather an article of faith and the sole guarantee for the preservation of Magyar supremacy in Hungary. Count István Tisza represented this view most forcefully in the last two decades of the Monarchy's existence. He repeatedly extolled the virtues of the Hungarian people, yet he never truly had faith in their political maturity; he believed that they could easily fall prey to kossuthist "demagoguery" or even to radical and socialist teachings. He feared, not without reason, that a full and free expression of the popular will might terminate the rule of the gentry and aristocracy and endanger Magyar supremacy. Such an eventuality might also end the close association with Austria which then would reduce Hungary from its assumed great power status to insignificance, gravely exposed to non-Magyar hostility within and outside the country. For Tisza, patriotism did not depend on whether Hungarian soldiers in the Common Army responded to commands in Magyar or in German. Rather, the essence of patriotism to him was maintaining Hungary as a great power, through its partnership with Austria, and through Austria as an ally of Germany.

István Tisza did feel most keenly the Magyar paradox, the gap between the nation's dynamic thrust forward and the fear of losing all the gains. The average 67-er was usually a complacent beneficiary and guardian of the *status quo*, but Tisza could see that, even though the alliance with Austria had to be retained as long as Austria abided by the 1867 Compromise, the growing instability on the Austrian domestic scene made it imperative for Hungary to broaden its base of support in some other direction. For him, democratization was out of

the question, and he repudiated forced magyarization and the dream of a Hungarian Empire of "30 million Magyars," an idea which cut across party lines in the Hungarian political arena. Rather, defying the all-pervasive chauvinistic sentiment, he attempted to pursue a policy of reconciliation and compromise with the largest national minority, the Rumanians of Transylvania. His reasons were manifold, but above all, he was motivated by his concern for Hungary's future. This is clear from the underlying theme of his conciliatory policy which stressed the vital interests of Hungarians and Rumanians in the Danube-basin, their interdependence against the common enemy, Pan-Slavism.² Tisza's negotiations with leaders of the Rumanian national minority did strike some response in individual members of this group, especially the clergy, but, on the whole, they did not produce the desired results.

Simultaneously to these negotiations, Tisza as the Speaker of the Lower House (May, 1912 - June, 1913) suppressed by forceful measures the opposition parties in the Hungarian Parliament in order to enable the passage of laws which assured continuous and growing support for the Austro-Hungarian Army. A progressively deteriorating Austro-Hungarian position in the Balkan Peninsula made such a support imperative, and also provoked the necessity, in addition to other domestic factors, of Tisza's appointment as prime minister of Hungary. He was, after all, acknowledged by the monarch as the only politician who had the will and the authority to push through the unpopular military measures. Tisza, over the violent protest of the opposition, formed his second cabinet on June 10, 1913. During these critical times, he used his powerful influence to counter the warmongering of the Chief of Staff of the Austro-Hungarian Army, Franz Conrad von Hotzendorf, and worked against the growing Russian and Serbian influence on the Balkans by peaceful means, particularly by supporting Bulgaria as the pivot of Austro-Hungarian influence there. Tisza's attitude prior to the outbreak of World War I was proud, assertive, even pugnacious at times. Yet, he was very much aware of the dangers threatening Hungary's assumed great power status, and therefore, he was circumspect, cautious, and calculating as well.

It is well-known that Tisza was the only leading statesman in the Monarchy, who—after the fateful shots in Sarajevo—adamantly opposed the war for nearly two critical weeks, the first half of July, 1914, and he changed his mind only by the middle of the month. His reasons for opposing the war were enumerated in two memoranda, submitted to the Emperor-King on July 1 and July 8 and exposed in the minutes of the Council of Ministers for Joint Affairs on July 7. In sum, Tisza, consistent with his foreign policy of prudence and caution,

asserted that to use the assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand as an excuse for reckoning with Serbia would be a fatal mistake. Lacking sufficient proof of Serbia's complicity, the Monarchy would incur the odium of disturbing the peace and would therefore begin the war under the most unfavorable circumstances. Rumania was virtually lost to the Central Powers and Bulgaria was too exhausted to be relied upon. Also, an attack on Serbia could easily lead to a major war which, in turn, would mean unbearable sacrifices and a heavy burden on the Monarchy's financial and economic resources. In spite of such forceful arguments, Tisza called on the German Ambassador in Vienna, Heinrich von Tschirschky, on July 14, and told him that finally he too had decided to pursue an energetic policy against Serbia in order to prove the vitality of the Monarchy and to put an end to an intolerable situation in the South. While saying farewell to Tschirschky, Tisza clasped his hands warmly and said, "We have to face the future newly united, calm, and firm." Emperor William noted on the margin of his ambassador's telegraphic account, "Finally a Man!"³

Tisza's abrupt change of heart has puzzled historians ever since, especially because Tisza was a man of the highest integrity who would never go against his convictions. The historical background was outlined in detail, because placing Tisza's action within a broader historical context may shed some new light on this puzzle. Tisza's first impulses prompted him to opt for peace, because Hungary could only lose in a war. Victory might bring more Slavs into Austria-Hungary, thereby upsetting the delicate ethnic balance of the Monarchy at the expense of the Magyars; on the other hand, a defeat might lead to the dismemberment of Hungary and to the loss of Transylvania in particular. Tisza knew that the failure of his negotiations with the leaders of the Transylvanian Rumanians left the conflict between them and the Magyar state unresolved and kept Transylvania as a potential trouble spot. It also assured, in defense of the co-nationals, the continual hostility of the nominal ally, Rumania, towards Hungary. In sum, Tisza knew instinctively that Hungary's interest, which in his mind was identical with the interest of the Monarchy, demanded not to go on the offensive but to hold the line for the time being. As a staunch advocate of Dualism, Tisza's fundamental sense of security rested with the great power status of the Monarchy. It was quite clear that by 1914, this assumed great power status depended on German support in any major conflict. Austria-Hungary could carry out a punitive expedition against Serbia on its own but never a major war against Russia. Tisza's time of crisis arrived when the German alliance, this *sine qua non* of his sense of security, was called into question. By the second week of July, 1914, a series of messages,

ambassadorial dispatches, and telegrams emphasized that the German government was considering the situation as a test case of resolve for the Central Powers in general and for Austria-Hungary in particular. Should Austria-Hungary fail to act boldly and assert itself as a great power, it would jeopardize German support in the future. Such a "threat" was not spelled out openly but it was implied, and certainly this was the message which registered with the Austrian and Hungarian leaders. Consequently, Tisza had two alternatives left. One was to persist in his opposition to the war and thereby risk Germany's goodwill and support without which the edifice of Austro-Hungarian power would crumble; the other was to suppress all doubts and hope for the best behind Germany's protective shield. Tisza came to reject the first alternative, because no Hungarian leader would risk leaving his nation in a vulnerable and unprotected position. The only exception, Kossuth's example in 1848-1849, was a frightening memento. Sensing this, the leaders of the opposition, Andrassy and Apponyi jumped on the German bandwagon just as enthusiastically if not more than the 67-ers. Even Count Mihály Károlyi, the leader of the left-wing of the 48-ers, supported the war at the beginning, though admittedly, he did not openly endorse the alliance with Germany.

What made Tisza enter von Tschirschky's office on that fateful July 14, was the same concern for Hungary's survival, which had motivated the thoughts and actions of most Hungarian statesmen, from Széchenyi to Eötvös, Deák, Andrassy Sr., and Kálmán Tisza. One may argue that Hungary's survival was not at stake in July, 1914, but by then, the component of national self-exaltation had reached a point where the existence of the illusion of Hungary as a great power was considered tantamount to the country's survival, and for such a cause no risk seemed to be great enough to take.

An additional question concerns Tisza's frantic emotional involvement in the war, hovering between enthusiasm and despair, even hysteria at times,⁴ in a man who had always been in full control of his emotions. One should, of course, make allowances for the hyperbolic rhetoric of the times and for the high stakes involved in the conflict. After all, a war of cataclysmic dimensions was going on, and the prime minister in charge of his country's war effort was bound to react to the events differently from the imperturbable and all-knowing "coffee-house conrads" around the corner. Yet, there was a certain almost predictably Hungarian quality in his state of excitement. As early as 1889, he had said in the Hungarian Parliament, "We have to prepare for war in peace. If this war comes then we can all agree that it will not be a child's play, neither for the Monarchy nor for the Hungarian nation, rather it may well be a life and death struggle."⁵ Four

years later, he pin-pointed Hungary's place in such a struggle, "We can hardly find an example in world history of such a small nation receiving such a great mission from the Divine Providence. This small nation (Hungary) is placed in perhaps the most exposed spot in Europe, in the crossroads of grave dangers and ambitious plans by powerful nations. This little nation defended civilization and freedom against Islam through centuries and had to defend them now against another danger which threatens European culture in the form of Slav absolutism."⁶ The frustrations of his first cabinet (June 17, 1903 - June 18, 1905) prompted Tisza to modify this exalted view and draw a gloomy picture of his nation, capable of fighting for its existence but unable to cope with problems in peace, "It has been demonstrated again what has been a 1000 years old curse upon the nation that only the grave dangers can bring forth the nation's good qualities, that the Hungarian nation can always suffer, bleed, and fight heroic battles for its liberty, but to live with it usefully in peace, to exploit it for the augmentation of its strength, and to utilize it steadily for patriotic and constructive work; no, the Hungarian nation has never been able to do so."⁷ But then better years were to come, and the disaster of the coalition propelled Tisza back to power, and before the outbreak of the war, he found himself in much firmer control over the political situation in Hungary than 10 years earlier. Shortly after the outbreak of the war, on August 27, 1914, Tisza laid bare his thoughts to his friend, Albert Berzeviczy, as follows: "Through 20 years the thought had tormented me that the Monarchy and within it the Hungarian nation is doomed to extinction, because God wishes to abandon the one whose mind He has taken away. In the past few years the situation began to change for the better, because newer and newer events awakened the hope that world history would not brush us aside. Now in these very critical days the die will be cast, but a nation which behaves in such a way confronting the mounting threats can not be condemned by Providence."⁸ Thus, Hungary's precarious position prompted Tisza to follow caution, but once his concern for Hungary could not be alleviated by the peaceful prolongation of the *status quo*, Hungary was called upon in Tisza's mind to perform its historic role as the defender of Western Civilization in Central Europe, a role, which by the gigantic task it implied, demanded the utmost in heroism, dedication, involvement, and sacrifices. Tisza himself then embraced the battle fully as the supreme test of his nation's prowess and vitality, as a providentially predestined ordeal.

Tisza's deep emotional involvement in the war did not of course dull his sense of caution completely. He remained adamantly opposed to territorial annexations in case of a victory, to the incorporation of Serbia in particular, and he was most unenthusiastic about Germany's

unconditional submarine warfare. His sense of fairness was outraged upon receiving news about atrocities committed by the Austro-Hungarian military and civilian authorities in occupied lands and in territories where national minorities were suspected to collaborate with the enemy. Tisza talked of "character assassination of innocents,"⁹ "wanton pestering," and scandalous arbitrariness,¹⁰ and he angrily reprimanded the Hungarian government commissioner of Transylvania, "The best way to set Transylvania ablaze is if we treat every educated Rumanian as a scoundrel and an enemy."¹¹ Nevertheless, his overpowering ambition during the war was to expand and fortify Magyar influence in the Monarchy and enhance his country's prestige. He could do so because no one in Austria among the politicians matched the single-minded forcefulness of his personality, and because he had a parliamentary majority behind him even after his resignation as prime minister on May 23, 1917, while in Austria the *Reichsrat* was not even called into session until late in the war. Also, Hungary's relative weight, as the granary of the Monarchy under Entente blockade, grew beyond the limits set by any constitutional clause or population census.

The gigantic life-and-death struggle and Tisza's total involvement in it made it imperative for him never to allow any erosion of his justification for the Hungarian war effort. Such a single-minded determination, assisted by Hungary's increasing influence and a concomitant contempt for Austria's weakness, caused him to handle Austria not as a respected equal but rather as a junior partner with a mixture of annoyance, condescension, and mistrust. He wrote to the Minister of Finance in the Council of Ministers for Joint Affairs, Count Istvan Burian, on June 6, 1917, "The traditional Austrian brotherly love embraces everything with a passion which does damage to Hungary."¹² He also spoke of the "slumbering virility of the people of Vienna."¹³ In a January 5, 1915, letter to the Foreign Minister, Count Leopold Berchtold, Tisza wrote, "The efforts of Austria and also the average value of the Austrian troops are way below ours. This is a fact that I am naturally silent about, nevertheless I cannot maintain the opposite."¹⁴ It is an admittedly thin credit to his often mentioned sense of fairness that he still manifested some understanding of Austria's needs as documented by those Austrian leaders who had frequent dealings with him. According to General Landwehr, the head of the Central Food Office in the latter part of the war, "Though he (Tisza) often pursued a policy of Magyar particularism, he still had a general view of things and did not ignore the common interest. When I confronted him with demands to help Austria, he never became impatient, he never promised much, but he kept the promises he made."¹⁵ Tisza's official correctness notwithstanding, the

overall Hungarian attitude towards Austria undoubtedly helped to undermine Dualism during the war. In Tisza's case, his sense or proportion on the parity with Austria faded rapidly beside the elementary force of his love and fear for Hungary.

While it was relatively easy to exert Magyar influence over Austria, to do the same *vis-à-vis* Germany was another matter. Here Hungary was on the defensive, and Tisza's thinking in this connection was expressed in his letter to Berchtold on September 3, 1914, "We cannot appear as the weak and timid protégé in the eyes of Germany."¹⁶ He had to fend off constant German pressure to make concessions to Italy and to the Rumanians in Transylvania. He also fought the German "Mitteleuropa" plan which he characterized as follows in a letter to a journalist friend: "No one appreciates our allies more than I do, but they have the 'good habit' of reaching for the whole arm when one offers them the little finger."¹⁷

Tisza's most perplexing attitude during the war concerned domestic politics. At a time, when most of the warring countries established coalition governments under the banner of the "union sacrée," Tisza refused to swim with the tide and still kept the opposition at arm's length. Also, at a time when mass participation in the war, both on the fronts and in the hinterlands, accelerated the process of democratization everywhere, Tisza stubbornly refused to concede any meaningful extension of the right to vote. Part of the reason for such inflexibility may have been purely personal; after all, he was not a man prone to change and alter his deeply ingrained habits and convictions. Beyond that, however, the high risks involved in the war may have made him less rather than more ready to compromise. In combatting the extension of suffrage, Tisza repeated the old arguments with unusual vehemence, which may indicate that he still believed that radical democratization would lead to national disaster, and if so, then such an attempt was to him even more inappropriate if not outrightly sinful when Hungary's survival was at stake.

In conclusion, Tisza's faith in his nation's ability to measure up to the challenge of a life-and-death struggle was destined either to reward him with at least a temporary victory over fear, anxiety, doubts plaguing the Magyar existence for over a century, or to condemn him to be crushed completely. Unknowingly, Tisza played out the ultimate stage of the battle between national anxiety and national illusion, and it was no wonder that when on October 18, 1918, he let slip the words, "We lost the war" in the Hungarian Parliament, according to an eyewitness, "What he said and what he did after that were the movements of a half-dead sleepwalker."¹⁸ When the Károlyi Revolution broke out on the night of October 30-31, he refused to escape from Budapest as if wishing to stay and die. And truly, the Old Order,

his Hungary lay in shambles. 1918 signalled an irretrievable blow to, if not the end of, the Magyar illusion, the idea of national grandeur. Perhaps it was an act of mercy that Tisza did not survive the passing of Great Hungary. On October 31, 1918, he was assassinated by a group of soldiers who held him responsible for the war. The same unshakable Calvinist faith in God's will which has characterized him throughout his long political career, accompanied him to his last moment; when falling to the floor, mortally wounded, he uttered his last words: "It had to happen this way!"¹⁹

NOTES

1. Lóránt Hegedüs, *Két Andrássy és Két Tisza* [The Two Andrassys and Two Tiszas] (Budapest, 1937), p. 283.
2. Gróf István Tisza, *Összes Művei* [Collected Works] (Budapest, 1923), III, 56.
3. Max Montgelas, ed., *Die Deutsche Dokumente zum Kriegsausbruch, 1914* (Berlin, 1927), I, 70.
4. Excerpts from his letter of April 17, 1915, to Burián, "I hope that I shall receive the telegram which reports on Bülow's conversation with Sonnino. Isn't there any news from Bucharest yet? Can not Fasciotti report anything interesting? My dear friend, I am not a nervous man, but I must feel the burden of the moment. Literally, the fate of the Monarchy is at stake, and a delay in decision may provoke a catastrophe which we must avert with exerting ourselves to the utmost . . . we must do more to alleviate the Italians' hostility . . . we must dispel their bad humor which we caused by our dilatory attitude . . . we have no time to lose . . . I write to you in haste with a tormented soul; I do express myself flimsily. The essence of the matter is that time is flying and only days separate us from the moment when inertia or inadequate activity might create an irreparable situation." — Tisza, *op. cit.*, p. 248.
5. Gróf István Tisza, *Képviselőházi Beszédei* [Parliamentary Speeches] (Budapest, 1930), I, 22.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 237.
7. Speech at the "Terézváros" Casino on October 10, 1904, quoted in József Östör, *Tisza István Saját Szavaiban* [István Tisza through his Own Words] (Budapest, 1927), p. 130.
8. Tisza, *Összes Művei*, II, 93.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
11. *Ibid.*, III, 21.
12. *Ibid.*, VI, 352.
13. *Ibid.*, III, 318.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
15. Ottokar Landwehr, *Hunger* (Wien, 1931), p. 85.
16. Tisza, *op. cit.*, II, 117.
17. *Ibid.*, III, 140.
18. Farkas József, ed., *Mindenki Új Utakra Készül* [Everyone is Preparing for the New] (Budapest, 1962), I, 50.
19. Gusztáv Erényi, *Graf Stefan Tisza* (Wien, 1935), p. 378.

Horthy, Hitler and the Hungary of 1944*

Peter Gosztony

Was the Hungarian Regent deluding himself when on the seventeenth of March, 1944, on Hitler's invitation, he left Budapest on a special train to meet the *Führer* at Klessheim castle near Salzburg? We know today that in Horthy's own entourage there were a few who had tried to dissuade him from making this journey. But the 76 year old head-of-state was still thinking in terms of the political morality which had prevailed in the days of Emperor-King Francis-Joseph. He had no conception of totalitarian politics, albeit the example of President Hacha (whom Hitler had lured to Berlin in 1939 so that he could bully this sickly man into consenting to a German occupation of rump-Czechoslovakia) should have made him wary of Hitler. But Horthy welcomed the German invitation: he did want to talk to the *Führer* in person, so that he could intervene with him personally and effect the release of the Hungarian divisions still fighting on the Eastern Front. "These divisions must be used to strengthen the Carpathians," was Horthy's excuse: in the spring of 1944 the Red Army was not more than a hundred kilometers from the Hungarian border.¹ In reality, through the return of the troops, Horthy had hoped to effect the defection of Hungary from the Axis in spite of the fact that the plan which he and Premier Miklos Kallay had concocted earlier (calling for Anglo-American paratroopers in the heart of Hungary) had proved unworkable.²

Ever since the spring of 1942, the Regent and the Premier had sought the opportunity and the means of taking Hungary out of the "German war" as smoothly as possible. After the Axis disasters at Stalingrad and Voronezh, they had put out feelers even to Moscow, but the response of the Soviets was negative.³ The discussions with the Anglo-Americans had gotten under way in earnest only after the fall of Mussolini; but plans which might have had concrete results were formulated in theory only, and were executed only on "paper".

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