
How the Habsburg Monarchy, Austria and Hungary Were Drawn into the Russian October Revolution between 1917 and 1919*

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In the years preceding World War One, a political, economic and social crisis had been developing in the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy, caused principally by structural changes arising from the mutation from an agrarian to an industrial state¹ and the complications of multiethnicity; this was exacerbated by the First World War.² In the summer of 1914, the Monarchy set out ambitious aims for the war, but in fact suffered defeats on several fronts. It was able to achieve some temporary territorial successes, but these were mainly due to financial and military support from its German ally, which in turn caused a power imbalance in the German-Austrian alliance. The profound changes in Russia during 1917 led on the one hand to the fall of the Tsarist regime, and on the other to a power grab by the Bolsheviks in November; as a result, Russia pulled out of the war and the situation deteriorated into an extremely bloody and violent struggle as Communist power took hold, and to a civil war that lasted until 1922. These internal Russian events created waves both internationally and transnationally, sending pulses around the world,³ with long-term consequences that echoed through much of the 20th century.

The fallout from both the February and November Russian revolutions contributed to exposing the internal weaknesses of the Habsburg Empire and plunged the Dual Monarchy into ever more complex difficulties; it eventually disintegrated in November 1918. Once Russia had ceased to be a military opponent – de facto after the October Revolution in 1917 and de jure after the Brest-Litovsk Peace Treaty in March 1918 – the Habsburg Monarchy was no longer required to play a balancing role among European powers. A new political power landscape developed, in which the victor nations began to take note of the demands of different national groups within the

former multi-ethnic states. The Entente forces relied on the internal collapse of the Dual Monarchy, and during the final year of the war gave overt support to national separatist movements. This undermining of the Habsburg Empire gave rise to various ideas and claims aimed at creating new territorial outlines in Central Europe. Although the example set by Russia was not the immediate cause of the disintegration, it served to accelerate it and exerted a powerful symbolic force.⁴ It was not only the continuing internal crisis that led to the collapse of the Habsburg Empire, but also its military defeat, and the political decisions made by the victorious Allies granting self-determination, at the expense of the Habsburg Monarchy, to the nations of East-Central and South-Eastern Europe.

1917–1918: Crisis and Developments Within Social Democracy

In military terms, the Eastern Front facing Russia was highly significant to the Habsburg Monarchy. In Vienna, the collapse of the Tsarist regime in the spring of 1917 seemed a favourable development. There, as in Berlin, it seemed to offer the prospect of a swift victory on the Eastern Front. This would not only have facilitated military progress on the Western Front, but also helped to allay difficulties in keeping supplies flowing.⁵ In the event, neither happened. The rulers in Vienna and Budapest perceived the internal changes within Russia, and especially the forced abdication of the Tsar and the establishment of a Bolshevik leadership, as a threat to the survival of monarchy.⁶

In the first two years of the war, the Habsburg Monarchy pursued ‘party truce’ politics (*Burgfriedenspolitik*). The disappointment caused by unfulfilled war

objectives, however, exacerbated the internal political tensions and the gulf between the Austrian and Hungarian halves of the Empire. The Austrian Social Democrats were the principal beneficiaries as the war years dragged on, since the Hungarian Left were not able to establish sufficient prominence. A decisive factor was the need for a mediator between the state and the working classes in the face of the increasing social and economic tensions produced by war.

The Social Democrats were important to the state in several ways. The union structures, which extended onto the shop floor, enabled them to exercise particular forms of social and political influence. The



Fig. 1: Karl Renner, Social Democrat and Austrian Chancellor of the First Republic 1918-1920, President of the Second Republic 1945-1950.

Austrian Social Democrats were therefore a more attractive option than the equivalent party in Hungary, a disparity due to numerous reasons. The Austrian Hereditary lands were more heavily industrialised, so that the population had a higher proportion of industrial workers. From 1907, all men had the

right to equal suffrage and a secret ballot, which enabled the development of workers' political parties; in the 1911 Reich elections, the parties of the Left gained 82 seats and became the strongest faction in the parliament.⁷

Although industrialisation had begun in the 1880s in the Hungarian part of the Empire, Austria-Hungary had remained a mostly agricultural country, with a smaller proportion of industrial workers among the general population. The limited census suffrage allowed neither the emergence of a workers' party nor any representation for the workers in parliament. After 1918, politicians acknowledged that state social care required a fundamentally new ap-

proach, and this led to the involvement of the Social Democrats in Austrian political power after 1918. The Austrian government, under the Social Democrat Chancellor Karl Renner (1870-1950) in alliance with the Christian Socialist Party and the Greater German People's Party (*Großdeutsche Volkspartei*), conducted consensus politics with collective responsibility. The government hoped that the development of social services would strengthen the links between the working class and the state that cared for them, and ensure their increasing integration into Austrian society.⁸

Even before the end of the war, the older political elite had granted concessions to the social democratic leadership. The Social Democrat Karl Renner, for example, was appointed to a post on the directorate of the Ministry for Food.⁹ Never before had a Social Democrat been given an official appointment. In the summer of 1917, Renner was even offered a post in government, but the Social Democrats turned



Fig. 2: Allegory of deprivation, a woman searches for scraps of coal, Vienna, in March 1919.



Fig. 3: 'March of the Workers' Councils', Jännerstreik, Vienna 1919.

the offer down.¹⁰ This implied that the Social Democrats had a shared responsibility for government policy. Unlike in Austria, Hungary suffered no food shortages in 1918, so the Hungarian government had less need to ally themselves with the Social Democrats in order to appease a restive working class. Instead, the major landowning elite carried out very restrictive policies right through to the end of the war. State initiatives to improve conditions for factory workers and other employees focused on specific business and economic issues; on a national level, they generally failed to yield either improvements in care and working conditions or higher wages.

The increase in support offered by the Left during the war resulted in better recruitment among the unions. The Austrian and Hungarian social democratic parties only supported the strikes as long as this was to their advantage. When this was no longer

the case, they made every effort to calm the situation and prevent riots.¹¹ This was characteristic of the ambivalent attitude of Austromarxists: they were radical in what they said, but moderate in what they did. The Hungarian Left too tended to act in this way, until the proclamation of the Soviet of Councils (*Räte-republik*) in March 1919.

The Russian February Revolution took the capital cities of the West by surprise. In the late autumn of 1917, very few political observers outside Russia reckoned on further, even wider-reaching political upheavals there.¹² The events of February 1917 had met with a comparatively positive reaction, but the governments of Europe were far more critical of the Bolshevik revolution in the following November. In both internal and external politics, the Bolsheviks overturned many features of regulated democratic order. Their impulse towards radical change was per-



Fig. 4: 'For the Republic', the fall of the monarchy with Jacobean symbolism, Hungarian poster painted by Mihály Biró, November 1918.

ceived among other things as a threat to Western civilisation. In 1917, Emperor Karl I (1887-1922) proposed a policy of measured reform and social consensus for Austria, to be drawn up in collaboration with the Social Democrats. From the late autumn of 1917, the Hungarian parliament also had to make social policy concessions, and it adopted legal measures to establish social security. Unlike their Austrian party colleagues, however, the Hungarian Social Democrats were unable to exert influence on these measures, as they had no parliamentary mandate.

By the start of 1918, Austrian food supplies had become critically low. On 14 January 1918, the government halved food rations per head. This set off a wave of strikes in Vienna New Town (Wiener Neustadt), organised by left-wing proletarian groups; these affected industrialised cities initially, but gradually spread across the entire Monarchy. Austrian and Hungarian Social Democrats made strenuous efforts to control the strikes and bring them to an end. How-

ever, they died down of their own accord, as the leadership were insufficiently well organised.¹³ Their experience of the 1918 'January strike' (*Jännerstreik*) led the governments of Austria and Hungary to react with increasing severity to any public protest gathering.¹⁴

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin had nurtured high hopes that the *Jännerstreik* would spark a revolution in Austria, or at the very least inspire an outcome more favourable to Russia at the peace negotiations in Brest-Litovsk.¹⁵ However, his hopes were to be dashed. For the Austrian and Hungarian Social Democrats, the lesson from the spate of strikes was that radical demands such as those made in Russia had found an echo in the Monarchy and led to the splintering of the Left, but that social democracy itself had little influence on these developments.

Late Autumn 1918 to Spring 1919: The Dominance of Social Democracy in the Shaping of the New State

During 1918/19, immediately following WWI, the major impact of revolutionary ideas emanating from Soviet Russia increased throughout Central Europe; this encouraged an appetite for world revolution, which was widely perceived as an existential requirement for the acceptance of a new social order. In the successor states to the former Habsburg Monarchy, there was strong reaction to reports from Russian emigrants and to attempts to establish the new social order by setting up left-wing proletarian councils. The right-wing bourgeoisie saw the 'spectre of Communism' as a virulent threat, and attached the label not only to radical left-wing groups but also, by implication, to the more politically moderate Social Democrats who, they maintained, were deriving advantage from post-monarchical conditions and would open the country up to Bolshevik influence. After 1918, there was widespread fear throughout society of a Communist expansion under the banner of proletarian internationalism; between the wars, right-wing parties and organisations across Central Europe countered this by calling for law and order, and appealing to what they hoped was a sense of national community.

The end of the monarchy shared by the two countries, and the new start in both Austria and Hungary, led to widespread political and social lambasting. In

1918, German Austria and Hungary had both lost significant proportions of the territories they had held under the Habsburg Dual Monarchy. Both national economies were affected, most clearly in terms of the supply situation. These profound changes gave rise to war weariness among the people and undermined any feeling of national community. Each of the two now diminished states was uncertain of its political future, and suffered from a lack of focus and a dwindling sense of social cohesion. In response, the population mobilised to mount strikes, demonstrations and riots. The new governments of Austria and Hungary, now both strongly Social Democrat, had to address these challenges.¹⁶ Both governments were largely composed of new politicians who had scant experience of being in government. After 1918, both states included not only a traditional centre of power but also, in parallel, new democratically established power structures such as worker and soldier councils, although these had no major influence on the shaping of the new state. The new political leaderships in Vienna and Budapest were acting along similar lines, which promised to yield a democratic and more socially aware political system.

On 21 October 1918, the Provisional National Assembly for German Austria, consisting of all German-speaking Reich Assembly deputies, met in Vienna and agreed on the establishment of an independent Austrian State, designated 'German Austria'. The Great Coalition of Social Democrats, Christian Socialists and Greater Germans was jointly established by the parties represented in the Reich Assembly at the end



Fig. 5: Declaration of the Hungarian Republic on 16 November 1918 by Prime Minister Count Mihály Károlyi (right) and János Hock (1859-1936), President of the National Council.



Fig. 6: Béla Kun, leader of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, March-August 1919.

of October 1918,¹⁷ and they agreed on a common crisis management agenda. Moderate left-wing, liberal and conservative parties established a broad consensus that conferred both legitimacy and a sense of stability on this political rebirth.

Austrian social democracy was strong and significant enough among the parties to be able to impose certain demands, such as their participation ratio in the government.¹⁸ The other participants in the coalition were well aware that the social democracy was in a strong position at the time. Being unable themselves to produce a viable solution to the current crisis, they agreed to the plan drawn up by the 'Austro-marxists'. Carlo Moos has suggested that this pragmatic approach to a consensus-led solution was a result of the Habsburg political heritage.¹⁹ Thanks to the wider political consensus and the cohesive influence of social democracy, and in spite of the considerable efforts of the radical Left in the spring of 1919, the birth of the young Republic in Austria took place in a relatively peaceful atmosphere. There was general relief at this apparent success, which in reality cast a temporary mask over the very real and widely divergent visions of the future nurtured by the right-wing and left-wing popular parties.

The Hungarian National Council was made up of three parties. On the one hand, the Independence Party led by the Liberal Democrat Count Mihály Károlyi (1875-1955) was in the parliament. On the other hand, the Radical Democrats – the party of urban intelligentsia – and the Social Democrats were opposition parties without parliamentary representation. Hungary's new beginning was thus not based



Fig. 7: 'Proletarians of all countries unite!', Expressionist Hungarian poster, 1919.

on an agreement between political parties. Political life was focused on the person of Mihály Károlyi. He dominated the affairs of state not only because of his key central position among the departments of state, but also because of the political parties' weakness. There were many common features between the political programmes of the Austrian Social Democrats and the one adopted on 8 October 1918 by the Hungarian Social Democrats. The Hungarian Social Democrats, in common with all other Hungarian parties, insisted on the inviolability of Hungarian sovereignty. The new Hungarian government, in spite of its defeat in the war and the growing armies of its new neighbour states, held firmly to the idea of a 'Great Hungary', an idea they had neither the military nor the political means to bring about. The government's failure in March 1919 led to the resignation of Mihály Károlyi and to the proclamation of the Hungarian Soviet Republic (*Räterepublik*) under the leadership of Béla Kun (1886–1936).

The victor nations saw Hungary's claim to its pre-war territories as endangering the new international 'collective security' order in Central and Eastern Europe, which principally favoured the successor states of the Habsburg Monarchy and the German Empire, while carving up the territories of the defeated nations and burdening them with reparation debts. The lack of international recognition was hard on Hungary, which nevertheless pursued pro-Western, Entente-friendly policies similar to Austria's. Lack of foreign policy success and a failure to manage either the domestic crisis or the economic challenges had all contributed to the collapse of Károlyi's ruling coalition of bourgeois radicals and Social Democrats, so the calls from some parts of Hungarian society for radical political solutions were welcomed.

There were some differences between the Communist parties of Austria and Hungary. The Communist Party of German Austria, the first Communist Party of Central and Western Europe, was set up on 3 November 1918 by a small group of intellectuals living in Austria. The lack of strong leadership among the Austrian Communists seriously compromised the party's effectiveness. Franz Koritschoner (1892–1941), who had known Lenin in exile in Switzerland, and the Social Democrat Friedrich Adler (1879–1960) both turned down the party leadership positions offered them by Moscow.²⁰

The Hungarian Communist Party was created by Béla Kun on 24 November 1918. He had been taken prisoner of war in Russia in 1916, and while there he had become a follower of the Russian Bolsheviks. A practical and highly charismatic politician, as a student in Klausenburg/Kolozsvár²¹ he had had a lively relationship with the Social Democratic Party. Because of his organisational abilities and his relationship with the Bolshevik leadership, Lenin had tasked him not only with setting up the Communist Party in Hungary but also with mounting a coup.²² The new party was well received not only by returning prisoners of war but also by the war-wounded and the unemployed. Béla Kun's emphatic criticism of Hungarian social democracy, which until the establishment of the *Räterepublik* had followed an Austromarxist policy, focused on discrediting the moderate left-wing government parties and creating division among them. The attacks by protagonists of the Hun-



Fig. 8: Call for a general strike in support of the Bolsheviks in Russia and the Hungarian Soviet Republic by the Communist Party of German Austria, July 1919.

garian *Räterepublik*, added to what was in any case a complex political landscape, made it very difficult for the Social Democrats to push through the consensus-driven, pragmatic political programme they had adopted, or to effectively utilise their low-key revolutionary rhetoric modelled on Austria's.

March – August 1919: The Hungarian *Räterepublik*

The proclamation of the Hungarian *Räterepublik* on 21 March 1919 alarmed the decision-makers at the Paris Peace Conference. In order to contain any further spread of Communism beyond Hungary, they aimed to isolate Hungary from its neighbouring states, and especially from Austria. As far as Austria was concerned, the containment strategy rested on

the one hand on concessions such as lifting the economic blockade and extending an invitation to the Paris Peace talks, and on the other hand on threatening to stop supplies from the Allies if a Soviet-style experiment were to take place. In order to prevent a 'domino effect', the Entente countries granted Austria a significant level of trade credit in March 1919.²³

The Social Democrats felt threatened by the example of Russia and by the establishment of Communist parties in both Austria and Hungary. Austromarxism was founded on emphatically democratic parliamentarism, and it found the *Räterepublik* unsympathetic. Otto Bauer (1881–1938), a founder of Austromarxism who served as Austrian Foreign Minister from November 1918 to July 1919, argued that if the proletariat were to exercise dictatorship over the urban bourgeois and rural farming communities, this would



Fig. 9: Otto Bauer, Austrian politician and founder of Austromarxism.

undermine the unity and consensus within Austrian society, and it should not be allowed.²⁴ He was typical of the Janus-faced ambivalence of Austromarxism: an emphasis on revolutionary objectives and a simultaneous instinct for moderation and sophisticated realpolitik. In response to pleas from Béla Kun

that Austria should align itself to the soviet movement and the world revolution, Bauer and others warned that establishing an Austrian *Räterepublik* would lead not only to civil war but also to the immediate cessation of supplies from the Entente nations, causing a catastrophic shortage of food in the country.²⁵

The Russian October Revolution and Bolshevik upheavals served as a model for the Hungarian *Räterepublik*. Kun hoped for a revolution that would spread in a similar way to the one in Russia; he made the mistake of relying on a collaboration in the summer of 1919 between the Hungarian army and the Soviet Red Army.²⁶ And indeed, the fate of the Hungarian *Räterepublik* depended on other factors as well. Kun's increasingly violent *Räterepublik* fell not only because of a conservative nationalist counterrevolution or because of insufficient support among the Hungarian public, but also because of its isolation from outside nations. It had not received political or diplomatic recognition from the Western nations, and the anticipated military assistance from Soviet Russia had failed to materialise, since the Red Army was tied up with the civil war in Russia.

The Russian example had a different impact on social democracy in Austria than in Hungary. When the Hungarian *Räterepublik* was set up, the Austrian Social Democrats raised the alarm about social experiments, and this temporarily strengthened their posi-

tion. They were delicately balanced between support given by liberal democrats sympathetic to the Left, while setting themselves clearly apart from the Communist experiment and the associated violent social upheavals. The Hungarian Social Democrats, on the other hand, were unable to resist being drawn in by Bolshevism. The political position of the Hungarian Social Democrats was distinctly weaker, and their lack of a vision of society either before or during WWI meant that the national democratic republic proclaimed in the late autumn of 1918 was not clearly social democratic in character. Hungarian social democracy was therefore not in a position to counter the populist arguments of the *Räterepublik*, nor especially to offer their own reform ideas to counter either the confiscation of large landholdings or land reform. The Hungarian Social Democrats lacked leaders capable of standing up to a seizure of power by the Communists.

From 1920 onwards, political power gradually organised itself into left-wing and right-wing groupings. The Austrian collaboration between Social Democrats and Christian Socialists had arisen out of necessity; it now began to crumble, and the governing coalition resigned in 1920. Once the Romanian army had forced the Hungarian *Räterepublik* out of office, the political and military situation gradually settled down, and from March 1920 a coalition of National Conservatives and the Party of Small Landowners took over the government. This shift to the right, in both countries, went hand in hand with an increasingly strong and persistent sense of threat from internal enemies, not only left-wing sympathisers but also Jews, both of whom were suspected of having Bolshevik sympathies. Hungary and Austria both suffered military defeat, both failed to acknowledge fault, both suffered from territorial 'amputation' and a damaged national self-image, and these proved to be a heavy burden to bear throughout the interwar years. As a result, both countries were vulnerable in the 1930s and early 1940s to falling under the influence of dictatorships ruled by nationalist, egalitarian and ethnically purist worldviews.

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Endnotes

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17. Following the National Assembly elections in February 1919, the coalition established between Social Democrats and Christian Socialists held power until June 1920.
18. The three conditions laid down by the Social Democrats are in the minutes in the Österreichisches Staatsarchiv (henceforth ÖStA), Archiv der Republik (henceforth AdR), Neues Politisches Archiv (henceforth NPA), Staatsratsprotokolle (henceforth StRP) Karton 1. Staatsratssitzung am 30 October 1918.
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24. More on Otto Bauer and the roles of Bauer and Béla Kuns in Ibolya Murber, 'Die ungarischen und österreichischen Sozialdemokraten und die russischen Revolutionen 1917,' in *Russische Revolutionen 1917. Presseanalysen aus Vorarlberg und internationale Aspekte*, ed. Rheticus-Gesellschaft, Schriftenreihe der Rheticus-Gesellschaft 73 (November 2017): 165-181.
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