

Trialism

By [Mateusz Drozdowski](#)

Before and at the beginning of World War I, various proposals concerning the creation of a third part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy were brought up for discussion. Each of the aspiring groups (Czech, South Slavic and Polish) assumed that becoming a new unit in the empire would entail equal political status as Cisleithania (Austria) and Transleithania (Hungary).

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First Signs of Trialism in the Austro-Hungarian Empire

Concepts of trialism, also referred to as *trialismus*, emerged soon after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, mostly as a reaction of Slavic nations to the Hungarians' new privileged position and remarkable sovereignty. Initial trialistic ideas were proposed by Czech politicians, among them [František Palacký \(1798-1876\)](#) and [František Ladislav Rieger \(1818-1903\)](#), who had previously promoted the idea of Austro-Slavism. This concept aimed to transform the empire into a federation of autonomous regions that would protect the rights of all, but especially Slavic, nations.

The establishment of dualism ([Austria and Hungary](#)) in 1867 made it impossible to implement these proposals; therefore, the Czechs suggested a trialistic solution. According to their original vision, the third segment of the monarchy would be a federation of Slavs, with its capital in Prague. The other, more concrete proposition, put forth in 1871 by the Czech local parliament (*Český zemský sněm*), was the so-called Fundamental Articles, in which Czechs insisted on being granted the same position as the Kingdom of Hungary through the receipt of the Bohemian Crown's lands (Bohemia, Moravia, Czech Silesia). The demands were never granted, given the strong objection of the Hungarians and Germans living in the Czech lands (especially in Moravia, Czech Silesia, Sudetenland and parts of Slovakia). [Francis Joseph I, Emperor of Austria \(1830-1916\)](#) decided not to be crowned king of Bohemia, even though he had previously made an official promise to that effect. Moreover, from the 1890s onwards, the Young Czech party's^[1] domination weakened the position of pro-trialism advocates in Czech public life.

Trialism and the South-Slavic Cause

At the turn of 19th and 20th century, the elements of trialism were occasionally present in the monarchy's political debates. It became a key issue when the [Bosnian controversy](#) arose. One of the aspects of a long and complex debate on this matter was the question whether Bosnia and Herzegovina, administrated by the Austro-Hungarian [Empire](#) since 1878, should finally be

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incorporated into Cisleithania or Transleithania. At the same time, Croatian politicians argued in favor of another solution: establishing a third, South Slavic segment of the empire, consisting of the lands inhabited by the Croats, Serbians and Bosnians, with around 5.3 million inhabitants, and a capital in Zagreb. The authors of the idea, including Croatian historian Ferdo Šišić, were accused of creating a Great Croatia. Curiously enough, the English historian and expert on Central-European issues, Robert William Seton-Watson supported the trialistic idea.

The trialistic solution, or more precisely, the South Slavic option, was also one of many ideas considered by the successor of the Austro-Hungarian throne, [Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este \(1863-1914\)](#). However, he never definitively declared himself in favor of any particular plan for transforming the monarchy. Even if he did consider trialism, it seemed to be nothing more than a way to exert pressure on the Hungarian leaders.

The idea of establishing a South Slavic section of the empire was also occasionally revived in Austria-Hungary during World War I, for example after the final defeat of [Serbia](#) in late 1915 and after the agreement with [Germany](#) in Kreuznach in October 1917. Due to constant objection from the Hungarian government, which strictly adhered to the preservation of the monarchy's dual structure, the trialistic idea never became a truly realistic political project. It was mentioned for the last time in October 1918, when Austro-Hungarian elites tried to prevent the empire's dissolution. Nevertheless, it was too late: the South Slavic nations were heading toward the creation of a new state comprised of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.

Trialism in Galicia before WWI

Trialistic ideas were significant in Polish public life before and during World War I. They were discussed together with the broader issue of the Austro-Polish solution (*Austropolnische Lösung*), the idea of reconstructing Polish sovereignty in cooperation with the Habsburg Monarchy. Starting in 1908, adherents of the Austro-Polish idea engaged in polemics with pro-Russian parties both in Galicia and in a part of [Poland](#) that was incorporated into the [Russian Empire](#) (traditionally called Kingdom of Poland). The debate was sparked by the fact that – for the first time – all three powers that partitioned Poland were seriously antagonistic toward each other; armed conflict was highly probable. It became clear that the potential war would be conducted mainly in Poland and would deeply impact the country.

The Essence of the Austro-Polish Idea Pre-WWI

Austro-Polish politicians (mostly the so-called Conservatives of Cracow and the Democratic Party) expected a Central Powers victory in WWI, a possible separation of the Kingdom of Poland from the Russian Empire, and Poland's unification with Galicia. A new state formation became the subject of various deliberations, which surfaced as three different proposals: personal union, subdualism and trialism.

Personal union consisted in establishing an independent Poland without any shared structures with Austria-Hungary apart from the monarch, a member of the Habsburg dynasty. This solution was treated as absolutely non-realistic from the beginning. Subdualism was considered the minimal option: a new Poland would be part of the Austrian Empire (Cisleithenia) with the status of an autonomous region. According to this concept, Poland would enjoy much less independence than Hungary and would have a slightly stronger position than the previously self-governing Galicia. Under these circumstances, trialism was the most popular solution: the rebirth of the kingdom as an equal, third part of Austria-Hungary.

Failure of the Austro-Polish Idea

In August 1914, the Austro-Polish idea was strongly promoted by prominent Polish politicians, such as [Leon Biliński \(1846-1923\)](#) and [Michał Bobrzyński \(1849-1935\)](#), during the discussion concerning an imperial proclamation to the Polish people. The primary discussion participants included Count [Leopold Berchtold \(1863-1942\)](#), the common minister of foreign affairs, [Stephan Burián von Rajecz \(1851-1922\)](#), representative of the Hungarian government, and [Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf \(1852-1925\)](#), the Imperial Army chief of staff. Despite the emperor's positive attitude toward the Austro-Polish idea, the Polish politicians' proclamation was eventually rejected due to Hungarian Prime Minister [István Tisza's \(1861-1918\)](#) objection during the Common Council of Ministers' meeting on 22 August 1914.

In the following months, the Polish Supreme National Committee (*Naczelny Komitet Narodowy*) repeatedly promoted trialism

and the Austro-Polish solution. The committee was a political organization created on 16 August 1914 to support the Polish Legions fighting as part of the Austro-Hungarian army. During the war, governing circles of the monarchy – particularly the common ministers of foreign affairs, Count Berchtold and Stephan Burián von Rajecz – occasionally considered the idea. However, it never came into political effect. What stood in the way was a constant Hungarian veto, the Austro-Hungarian army's reluctant attitude, danger of an increased [Polish-Ukrainian conflict](#), and finally a common, Austro-German decision to establish only in the Russian part of Poland a small, semi-independent state.

Mateusz Drozdowski, Jagiellonian University

Section Editor: [Tamara Scheer](#)

Notes

1. ↑ *Mladočeši*, also known as the National Liberal Party, *Národní strana svobodomyšlná*: liberal, democratic and national party fighting for the realization of the Czech autonomy

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