

Governments-Parliaments and Parties (Hungary)

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Political life in the Hungarian part of the Dual Monarchy (particularly the constitutional framework, political traditions and mentality) can only be characterized as very different from that of the Cisleithanian half, with all the consequences upon the work and role of the Hungarian parliament during the First World War. The characteristics of the parliament provide explanations for the stability of the government in the first war years and the events following the military collapse of Austria–Hungary.

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Introduction

The Hungarian parliament stood in the centre of an honoured constitutional system perceived as on par with that of [England](#). This constitutional pride served Hungarian aspirations for independence

against Vienna. Ever since the Austro-Hungarian Compromise (*Ausgleich*) of 1867, the position of the Hungarian state within the empire and relations with Austria remained central questions of the debate that formed the main axis of political division in the Hungarian parliament. The Austrian emperor was primarily seen as king of the Hungarians (expected to keep and protect the country and its people in all their traditional freedoms and rights).^[1] There could be no serious talk of curtailing the parliament's rights even in wartime.

By the early 1900s, the new parliament building had been built in Budapest, modelled to a large extent after Westminster and called by its architect "the Temple of Constitution". The politics taking place within, however, were less able to meet the values suggested by the building's name.^[2]

Characteristics of Parliamentary Politics in Hungary. Suffrage, Representation and Parties on the Eve of the War

Hungary had no codified (written) constitution. The power, respect and influence of various institutions largely depended on the old traditions, the political experience of the Reform Age (1825–1848) and the long-lasting fight for independence from Austria both on the battlefields and in the political arena between 1848 and 1867.

In Hungary, the parliament had a dominant position and real powers, effectively controlling the government. Its power could only be limited by wartime emergency measures (as regulated by Parliamentary Act LXIII of 1912) and parliamentary acts (Acts XII and XIV–XVI of 1867) regulating the constitutional relationship with Austria in some areas of governmental power like foreign affairs, defence policy and the army, regarded as prerogatives of the crowned monarch. The latter issues remained at the centre of debate, in spite of the long-term stability guaranteed by the Compromise, often leading to bitter political splits and ultimately to the crisis of the dualist system in the early 1900s. Through its right to vote on the budget of the common ministries, the Hungarian parliament had considerable influence upon foreign and defence policy, though this influence was generally underestimated in Hungary and perhaps overestimated in Vienna. Nevertheless, only those parliamentary acts that were granted royal assent could become law.^[3]

Although parties had local organisations, they typically lacked a permanent hierarchical structure between elections (held every five years). The work and role of the parties were closely related to parliamentary activities and election campaigns. Parties had no real intention of attracting a large membership or mobilizing the masses, except the Catholic People's Party and the Social Democratic Party. The Social Democrats had no real chance to become a parliamentary force under the country's election system. The undemocratic election system guaranteed not only the leading position of a traditional élite, but also Hungarian supremacy over the minorities. In contrast to Cisleithania, where universal and equal suffrage for adult males was introduced for parliamentary elections in 1907, the democratization process in Hungary was very slow. In 1910 only 1.16 million adult males (6.4 percent of the total population) had the right to vote, out of an overall population of

18.2 million. After several unsuccessful efforts to extend voting rights, two acts of parliament, one in 1913 and another more liberal one in 1918 (under the impact of the war) were passed. Neither of them introduced universal secret ballot. The last general elections were held in 1910 and the mandate of the Parliament was extended in 1915.^[4]

During the first three years of the Great War, parliamentary politics remained under the domination of Prime Minister István Tisza (1861–1918), who retained most of his influence even after his resignation in 1917. Tisza and his National Labour Party (*Nemzeti Munkapárt*, having nothing to do whatsoever with the socialist labour movements of the time) represented a well-established conservative force with influence all over the country, and a straightforward program of protecting Hungarian supremacy against the minority nationalist movements, while maintaining the dualist system in its original form. Tisza was a real strongman with considerable talent and solid principles, but lacked flexibility when confronted with situations requiring a more pragmatic approach, the latter a quality so characteristic of his father Kálmán Tisza (1830-1902), who served as prime minister at the head of the Liberal Party (*Szabadelvű Párt*) from 1875 to 1890. István Tisza's party virtually grew out of the ruins of his father's party, the governing force for thirty years before its election defeat in 1905, an event that undermined the stability of the dualist system in Hungary almost immediately. After five years, a "Phoenix bird" rose victoriously from the ashes, and the election success of the Labour Party secured a comfortable majority in the House of Representatives (*Képviselőház*) for Tisza, who managed to drive back the political forces of the nationalist minorities.^[5]

The party structure in Hungary had its roots in the pre-1867 era, and for decades the main opposition force remained the '48 Independence Party, formed after the Independence Party of the more radical liberals and the '48 Party (the name referred to 1848 and the idea of full Hungarian sovereignty) merged into one united party. There were other important party formations during the era of dualism, but they played temporary roles. The Constitution Party and the National Party, although the first only reappeared in a newly organized form in 1913, and the latter was non-existent in the wartime parliament (from 1910 to 1918), were closely attached to two important political characters during the war: Count Gyula (Julius) Andrássy the Younger (1860–1929), and Count Albert Apponyi (1846–1933), later head of the Hungarian Peace Delegation in 1920. During the war, following splits and new party formations, the main opposition party was again The United '48 Independence Party (after two separate Independence Party factions had merged in 1913).

In 1910 the National Labour Party won 256 seats (out of a total of 413 elected members), while the two independist parties (the Kossuth Party and the other one led by Gyula Justh (1850–1917),) won ninety-five. Political Catholicism was represented by the People's Party (thirteen seats), and only eight members of parliament independently represented national movements (as opposed to twenty-five before 1910). The Roumanian National Party had five representatives, the Slovak National Party three. Two members represented the Democratic Party, one the Christian Socialist Party and there were over thirty independent members, plus five agrarian party representatives (representing two parties, one with an '48 independist programme).^[6] All members of parliament were elected in

individual constituencies. The delegated members of the Croatian *Sabor* (40) also received seats (securing the loyalty of Croats was an important issue, as the relationship between the two “countries of the Hungarian Crown” seemed tense in the years preceding the war’s outbreak). It should be noted that a certain number of mandates were allotted as a result of political pacts or the withdrawal of candidates. For example, an agreement with the National Labour Party guaranteed parliamentary seats for the Saxon People’s Party (representing the ethnic German Saxon community in Transylvania; their mandates were originally included in the 256 of the National Labour Party).

The Hungarian parliament was bicameral. As a heritage of the past, the Upper House was dominated by the landed aristocrats (while fifty life-long members could be appointed by the king following governmental recommendation), and later attempts to carry out reform brought only partial success. The Upper House, far from being insignificant, kept its somewhat hollow prestige, while the major arena of debate and source of real power was undoubtedly the House of Representatives.^[7]

Concerning the common affairs of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (foreign affairs, common army, common finances), parliamentary control over the work of the Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of War was carried out by the Delegations, an important constitutional body in the dualist system, the members of which were delegated from among the members of the Cisleithanian Parliament (*Reichsrat*) and the Hungarian Parliament (*Országgyűlés*) respectively, each sending forty delegates from the Lower House, and twenty from the Upper House. The two delegations met once a year (in Vienna or in Budapest). After hearing the reports of the common ministers, the delegations voted on the ministries’ budgets.

The Hungarian “Union Sacrée” or “Treuga Dei” and the First War Years

The Hungarian prime minister’s initial rejection of punitive military action against [Serbia](#) at the beginning of the [July Crisis](#) is well-known. He was not against war in principle, however. What he did not favour was the timing. In the end, he accepted the standpoint of those in the Common Ministerial Council supporting the war. Tisza held his first war speech in the Hungarian parliament on 28 July 1914. The speech was followed by the reaction of the parliamentary opposition and the relevant royal rescript was read. Parliament was adjourned by the king and a new session was not opened until late November 1914.^[8]

The opposition applauded the war unanimously. Albert Apponyi gave a speech on behalf of the whole parliamentary opposition: “We may also comment on the beginning of this reckoning by briefly saying [...]: at last!”^[9] Count [Mihály Károlyi \(1875–1955\)](#) of the left-wing of the Independence Party was abroad at the time. Before war was declared, he already disfavoured the German alliance. He was only able to make his way back home from a journey to [France](#) and the [United States](#) with difficulty. Having returned, however, he did not raise his voice against the war. Moreover, he read the

statement of the Independence Party supporting the war in November 1914.

The parties outside parliament represented largely pacifistic attitudes. The Hungarian Social Democratic Party and the Radical Party of intellectuals were essentially against the war. Their attitude was quickly modified, though, as they perceived the dangers of an overwhelming Russian attack. The Social Democrats did not want to risk a suspension, either, and some even supported the war effort (similarly to their German comrades).^[10]

One could not imagine a more solid “*union sacrée*” than the one formed in Hungary by August 1914, although the real mood of the public was probably less enthusiastic. The so-called “divine peace” (*Treuga Dei*), as it was called at the time, lasted for two years, although the critical front situation and great **casualties** in the east inclined opposition leaders to express their criticism. While anxiety grew concerning the war’s outcome (especially after **Italy**’s entry in May 1915), pro-war sentiments were still reinforced by military success in the east (**Gorlice–Tarnów Offensive**).

The End of the “Treuga Dei”

The idea to continue the war until a victorious end was first questioned openly by Count Károlyi in December 1915, indicating a power struggle and political differences inside the Independence Party. Károlyi made the first steps towards a new and independent policy, which entailed cooperation with political forces outside parliament, while it was still unclear how his party would react to further (unfavourable) events in the war. Later, Apponyi, his respectable adversary in the party, was also eager to find ways out of the war and even sent informal, secret peace-feelers, recognizing the disastrous consequences a defeat would entail for Hungary. Apponyi remained silent about his initiatives and intentions, during and after the war, while Károlyi – with his central role in the **revolutionary period** of 1918 and 1919 – was quickly labelled as pro-Entente or “flirting with the enemy” in post-war public speech and memoirs.^[11] Democratic progress and an agrarian reform were kept on the agenda by the opposition, despite Tisza’s rejection of greater changes. However, most leaders continued to opt for cooperation with the government so as not to endanger the war effort.

By the summer of 1916, Károlyi had made up his mind to make clean breast of the situation. He resigned from his party presidency and founded a new Independence Party, informally called Károlyi Party (as they adopted the name of their original party after the secession). Károlyi’s new party aligned itself with the Social Democrats in a coalition for universal suffrage. During the war years the role of the Social Democrats in organizing the provisioning of workers (sanctioned by the government) enabled this extra-parliamentary party to draw wider support. Meanwhile, **Romania**’s war entry in August 1916, in addition to severe offensives on the **Western** and **Eastern fronts**, contributed to further anxieties in Hungary.^[12] The “Treuga Dei” was virtually over by the autumn of 1916, and the opposition started attacking the government. Károlyi gradually found support in a country more and more exhausted by the war.

New Political Waves, Charles IV's Succession and Tisza's Resignation, Government Formations by Esterházy and Wekerle

On 21 November 1916, Francis Joseph I, Emperor of Austria (1830–1916) died. His successor Charles I, Emperor of Austria (1887–1922) (King Károly IV as Hungarian monarch) expressed his wish to change course, and, within a short time after his coronation, he gave clear voice to his dissatisfaction with Tisza, who, feeling the pressure and facing severe attacks in parliament, finally submitted his resignation on 22 May 1917, although only after the king expressed his wish that he do so.

The new prime minister appointed by Charles, Count Móric Esterházy (1881–1960), proved to be unsuccessful within a very short time, as Tisza's supporters were still in the majority in the House of Representatives and their influence remained intact. Internal reforms could make no progress under these circumstances, and Esterházy was not ready to adopt a more radical type of policy relying both on forces outside the Hungarian parliament and the personal backing of the king.^[13] Thus, politics seemed to return to "business as usual" before the end of August 1917, and Esterházy resigned. However, under his premiership, lord lieutenants from the National Labour Party had been replaced in the counties and opposition parties reorganized themselves where they had suspended their activities earlier.

As the war progressed, Austria-Hungary's military efforts depended more than ever on [Germany](#). This seemed to limit Hungarian political leaders' freedom to manoeuvre. Many feared that a fading [morale](#) on the home front could lead to an unexpected collapse, so a strong hand and resolute action were thought to be more than necessary. This explains why the majority of the opposition decided to stand behind a new government formed by Sándor Wekerle (1848–1921), a veteran politician, whose name was heard most favourably in Berlin. Wekerle was a brilliant negotiator, who managed to organize support for a stable government. He lacked any vision, though, for a successful transition from the old system into a new one in times of great upheaval. Relying on the support of a new party (a real "political hybrid" created from a mix of party dissidents early 1918) and muddling through crises, he handed in his resignation four times, but nobody was found in his place until the final days of the monarchy came.^[14]

Conclusion

The final phase of the war did not bring a clear situation as for who could establish an efficient government with sufficient public support to protect Hungarian interests home and abroad, following a military collapse already on the horizon. On 17 October 1918, it was Tisza himself who admitted in the parliament that "this war is lost". Events followed that changed the political landscape in Hungary quickly and dramatically as the clear consequence of a long and devastating war. In the process, the Hungarian "Long" Parliament of 1910–1918 was unable to play an important role. On 23 October 1918, following the Emperor's Proclamation (the famous *Völkermanifest*), the Hungarian National Council was formed under the leadership of Count Mihály Károlyi, viewed by then as the only leading

politician able to gain trust in the victorious Entente camp. In November 1918, the National Council seemed to be the sole credible political body to represent a new Hungary. On 31 October 1918, Károlyi was appointed prime minister, following the one-day premiership of Count [János Hadik \(1863–1933\)](#).

The last session of the House of Representatives was opened on 16 November 1918. The dissolution of the House was pronounced unanimously. All representatives were then asked to attend the celebratory assembly of the National Council in the spectacular hall under the dome of the parliament, a final act of half a century of history.^[15]

The Hungarian parliament was a respected embodiment of Hungarian independence, while it had become more and more questionable to what extent it was the true representation of a modern nation. The war years were not at all favourable for reforms. At the same time, national goals or even national existence seemed greatly endangered. Parliamentary politics, with the looming catastrophic defeat, could not find new ways either in internal or (what would have been crucial for a country acquiring its independence after centuries) external policy. Consequently, the years of revolution and transition raised the tormenting questions of legitimacy both in the legal and political interpretations of national objectives. The most prominent politicians in the pre-1918 parliament, like Tisza (through his assassination) or Károlyi (through his promising and radical, but unsuccessful role), left behind historic images grander than their contemporary roles would suggest, dividing some of the Hungarian public even today.^[16]

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Notes

1. ↑ For constitutional history see: Péter, László: Hungary's Long Nineteenth Century. Constitutional and Democratic Traditions in a European Perspective, Collected Studies, in: Lojkó, Miklós (ed.): Central and Eastern Europe. Regional Perspectives in Global Context, Boston, 2012, pp. 15–130, 213–275.
2. ↑ Cieger, András: National Identity and Constitutional Patriotism in the Context of Modern Hungarian History. An Overview, in: The Hungarian Historical Review 5/1 (2016), pp. 130–133.
3. ↑ Kozári, Mónika: A dualista rendszer (1867–1918), Budapest 2005, pp. 83–95.
4. ↑ Ibid., pp. 131–150.
5. ↑ On Tisza see: Burián, Stephan: Austria in Dissolution, New York 1925, p. 252, quoted in: Joó, András: The Origins and Legacy of World War I. An (Austro-)Hungarian Perspective, in: Múltunk 61/Special Issue (Memory and Memorialization of WWI in East Central Europe. Past and Present) (2016), pp. 41–42 ^[1]; Kozári, A dualista 2005, pp. 134–148.

6. † Hermann, Róbert / M. Kiss, Sándor: Hungary's Parliament (Chapter I), in: The Hungarian National Assembly, Budapest 2011, pp. 13–21; Boros, Zsuzsanna / Szabó, Dániel: Parlamentarizmus Magyarországon, 1867–1944. Parlament, pártok, választások, Budapest 2008, pp. 56–59.
7. † Kozári, A dualista 2005, pp. 107–108; Hermann / M. Kiss, Hungary's Parliament 2011, p. 27.
8. † Képviselőházi Napló 1910–1915, vol. XXXVI, Budapest 1917, pp. 191–192.
9. † Ibid., p. 192.
10. † Gerő, András: Die politische Elite Ungarns und der Ausbruch des Ersten Weltkriegs. Politische Haltungen und Kulturelle Motivationen, in: Mesner, Maria et al. (eds.): Parteien und Gesellschaft im Ersten Weltkrieg. Das Beispiel Österreich-Ungarn, Wien et al. 2014, pp. 93–106.
11. † Hajdu, Tibor: Emlékezet és valóság. A magyar politika vezéralakjai a világháborúban, in: Századok 138/6 (2004), p. 1458.
12. † Hajdu, Tibor: Károlyi Mihály. Politikai életrajz, Budapest 1978, pp. 196–199.
13. † Ibid., pp. 208–226.
14. † Balla, Antal et al. (eds.): A magyar országgyűlés története 1867–1927, Budapest 1927, pp. 384–403.
15. † Bérenger, Jean / Kecskeméti, Károly: Országgyűlés és parlamenti élet Magyarországon. 1608–1918, Budapest 2008, pp. 418–419, 422–423. See also the original French version: Bérenger, Jean / Kecskeméti, Károly: Parlement et vie parlementaire en Hongrie. 1608–1918, Paris 2005, pp. 500–501.
16. † Hajdu, Emlékezet 1978, p. 1456; see also: Joó, Origins 2016, pp. 37–42, 48–49.

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