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EDITORS
Peter Pastor
Ivan Sanders



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MYTH and REMEMBRANCE

The Dissolution of the
Habsburg Empire in the
Memoir Literature of the
Austro-Hungarian Political Elite

Gergely Romsics

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Thomas J. DeKornfeld and
Helen D. Hiltabidle

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47 Cecilia Drive, Wayne, New Jersey

07470-4649

E-mail: pastorp@mail.montclair.edu



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CONTENTS

FOREWORD	vii
PART ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
1. The Theoretical and Methodological Framework	1
2. Psychological and Narrative Aspects of the Analysis	4
PART TWO: THE IMPERIAL ELITE	13
1. Characteristics of the Old Austrian Identity	13
2. Austria in the Eyes of the Old Austrians	15
3. Dynasty and Dissolution	19
4. Hopes and Perils during the Years of World War I	26
5. The Fall of the Monarchy	34
6. The Monarchy as the Mythical Area of Collective Memory	43
PART THREE: RECOLLECTIONS OF THE HUNGARIAN POLITICAL ELITE	51
1. The Sociopolitical Background of the Hungarian Elite Memoirists	51
2. Hungarian Memories of the Dualist Era	53
3. Assessments of the World War in the Recollections	59
4. The Era of Revolutions. Narratives of Heroism and of the Loss of the Country	66
5. Tisza and Károlyi: Examples of Emblematic Condensation	79
6. Dismembered Hungary and the Disintegration of the Discourses	89
PART FOUR: THE AUSTRO-GERMANS	101
1. Characteristics of the Austro-German Elite	101

2. The Dissolution of the Monarchy in the Eyes of the Successors	104
3. Emergence of the New Austria in the Memoirs	124
PART FIVE: THE POETICS OF MEMOIRS	139
1. The Temporality of the Memoirs	142
2. Memory and the Act of Naming	152
3. Metaphor and Memory	155
4. The Languages of Memoirs	161
PART SIX: CONCLUSIONS	167
APPENDIX: MEMOIRIST BIOGRAPHIES	179
1. The Old Austrians	179
2. The Hungarians	189
3. The Austro-Germans	205
NOTES	213
BIBLIOGRAPHY	251
INDEX	267
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	273
BOOKS PUBLISHED BY CHSP	274

FOREWORD

Research into the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy is an inexhaustible task. There is hardly a day when we do not find a discussion of the conditions, future and potential of central Europe in the pages of the daily press. As part of these discussions it is impossible to avoid mentioning the history of the Habsburg empire, its shortcomings, what there was and what there could have been. In spite of this, I did my best to resist the temptation of answering these questions in this book. I was more interested in the way the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was perceived and tried instead to present the history of the first chapter of the ongoing debate.

This book is based on the fundamental, albeit today platitudinous, contention that the past exists only in the perception of the memorialists, i.e. it assumes that there are individuals who look back in time and construct narrations about the past. Such a person is in possession of Kant's "disinterested interest" only in the rarest of cases and hardly ever looks back without some prejudice. The historian, according to the rules of his craft struggles with his own ideological preferences, trying to minimize their influence on his writing. The memoirist, perhaps ignorant of the rules, approaches the matter with no less honesty and good intentions. Even though the texts of the authors appear as the collective product of shared recollections this does not mean that the memoirs are nothing but interesting sources of intellectual history. Many of them are readings that indeed bring some chapters of the past closer to the reader.

As an historian, I have attempted to distance history and not to bring it closer. I have tried to present the myths of the past century as fictional discussions that were suitable for the transmission of definite

views of the world by encoding ideological content into the “truthful” reporting of a spectator. This assumption reveals my doubts about what is known as historical understanding or *Verstehen*, still considered as one of the most important attributes of an historian. Thus, instead of writing about reality, I aimed to analyze the fictional representations of reality, in many instances at the cost of strict historicity. In the following pages there is no consistent discussion that embed the genesis and evolution of myths in time as a continuous narrative. Instead, I present a still frame that makes no attempt to be a precise mirror image of reality. At the same time, the book presents the narrative schemes, language and interrelationships of the works created between the two World Wars by collective memory. It makes no attempt to show the sources of the current myths and is not a genealogical experiment. It provides a static model, with its advantages and disadvantages, whose purpose is to survey and systematize.

The focus of the investigation is the complex relationship between language and narrative and the dynamics of the collective memory. More specifically, the triad of the image created of the past, the group-specific use of the language becoming an adequate tool for the discussion of the past and the interaction with the increasingly canonizing historical process are brought to bear on each other. The tools of traditional historiography are insufficient for introducing and analyzing the above. The process must be open toward the social sciences regardless of the hazards this might entail. But then, is it justified to use literary, sociological, socio-psychological and anthropological theories? Do crossovers into the social sciences yield an unscientific, at worst, dilettantish, product? Regardless from which scientific discipline my work is examined, it may appear that my conclusions are unfounded because the discussion and the models lack the cohesive and contextualizing discourse of the given discipline and because I lack the expert knowledge that comes only from a lifetime of deep devotion to the field.

Yet, I believe that, by their convergence in history, these approaches are suitable for the development of a new synthesis and that, furthermore, preservation of the quality commitment to representing the past adequately demands such an integrative methodology. The texts are not purely self-referential, but are also signifiers of historic struc-

tures, and an analysis of them must concern itself as much with textual structures as with the aspects of society and mentality that condition, and at the same time are conditioned by, these texts. Limiting attention to the text always raises the danger of dehistoricizing the scientific narrative, because then the source is not perceived as a signifier, incomplete and perhaps misleading, of the past but constitutes the totality of the historian's horizon. A historical dialogue supposes approaching narrative sources both from the perspective of the autonomy of the text and as referring to social systems. Omitting the latter would lead to the loss of historicity while omitting the former would lead to the incomplete utilization of the sources, given that the goal here is not a fact-centered chronological narrative, but an examination of the past based on models of mentalities.

My guide in realizing this complex task was the experience gained during my university studies. Even though at the time of writing this book I was no longer a student I became familiar with most of the methodologies during the seminars of Gyula Benda at Eötvös College. The theories of language and language usage were discussed with Gábor Bezeczky during the tutorial sessions at Láthatatlan [Invisible] College where my peer, Dávid Marno, contributed comments that helped refine my views on narrativity and language. Neither he nor Gábor ever tired of my constant references to the memoirs. Most of the useful hints during the research came from Gábor Gyáni who very thoroughly read both the first and the second versions of the text, drawing my attention to problematic statements and lines of thought that were left hiding in the text due to my oversight. It was also Professor Gyáni who introduced me to the research on collective memory at the tutorial sessions at the Láthatatlan College. Many further changes were made in the semi-final and final text on the basis of discussions, debates and personal comments at the graduate courses I took with Professors Gábor Székely and András Balogh. Also, throughout the entire process, I had the support, help, criticism and approval of my father from whom, over two decades, I have been able to observe the workings of the historian's mind and the activities of an historian. Without them this book could not have been written. Mistakes in the text nevertheless only indicate that I should have listened to advice more carefully. I dedicate my work to them.

Research in Hungary and Austria and the writing of this book were generously supported by the Pro Renovanda Cultura Hungariae Foundation, by Láthatatlan College and by the Zeit-Stiftung, Hamburg. I hope the work will serve to reinforce the conviction of all those who placed their trust in me. Their support was put to good use.