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“Friede um jeden Preis? Experiences, Preconceptions, and Realities in
the Failed Austro-Hungarian Peace Attempt in Spring 1917”

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Sara Friedman, M.A.I.S.

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ABSTRACT

When it became evident that the First World War would last much longer than any of its participants expected, Austria-Hungary began exploring options for peace. Prince Sixtus' attempt at opening negotiations with France and Great Britain in the spring of 1917, sanctioned by the Habsburg emperor but kept secret from the German ally, came the farthest in reaching that goal, but ultimately fell short. Nevertheless, its failure should be viewed in the context of the general war situation. The peace terms and perceptions of Sixtus and Karl were in many ways flawed, however it is difficult to think of better alternatives. By this point in the war, the Habsburg empire had little chance for any possible positive outcome. At the very least, the so-called Sixtus Brief addressed specific concerns, interests, and experiences that Austria-Hungary had been dealing with. Although the peace attempt failed, it offers an opportunity to observe the Habsburg mindset in a time of deep, existential crisis. One interpretation of this situation takes the Sixtus peace efforts as a logical step for Austria-Hungary to take in order to realize its goal of somehow concluding peace. The exact form of the peace they wished to conclude is unclear, even less so among those actually involved. This lack of clarity or focus, perhaps even more than the controversial conditions for peace, was the attempt's fatal flaw. Instead of securing Austria-Hungary's now-tenuous position in the European balance of power, the Sixtus attempt instead underlined its most dangerous weaknesses.

Nachdem festgestellt wurde, dass der Erste Weltkrieg viel länger dauern würde, als alle Involvierte erwarteten, prüfte Österreich-Ungarn mögliche Friedensoptionen. Prinz Sixtus Versuch die Friedensverhandlungen mit Frankreich und Großbritannien im Frühling 1917 zu eröffnen – ein Versuch, an dem sich Kaiser Karl beteiligte, der den deutschen Verbündeten aber vorenthalten wurde - kam diesem Ziel sehr nahe, scheiterte aber dennoch. Dieser Misserfolg muss allerdings im Kontext der gesamten Kriegssituation beurteilt werden. Die Friedensbedingungen waren zweifellos nicht ganz optimal, genauso wenig wie die Wahrnehmung der Situation von Sixtus und Karl im Allgemeinen – eine bessere Alternative ist unter den Umständen aber auch schwer vorstellbar. Zu diesem Zeitpunkt war es für das Habsburgerreich fast unmöglich noch erfolgreich aus dieser verhängnisvollen Lage auszusteigen. Zumindest adressierte der sogenannte Sixtus Brief klare Bedenken, Interessen und Erfahrungen Österreich-Ungarns. Obwohl der Friedensversuch scheiterte, bietet er trotzdem die Möglichkeit, die habsburgische Denkweise während einer tiefen existentiellen Krise nachzuvollziehen. Eine Interpretation versteht die Sixtus Friedensbemühungen als einen logischen Schritt Österreich-Ungarns dahingehend, irgendwie Frieden zu schließen. Wie dieser Frieden allerdings konkret aussehen sollte, ist nicht klar - den direkt Beteiligten vermutlich sogar noch weniger. Diese Unklarheit, vielleicht sogar mehr als die kontroversen Friedensbedingungen, waren das Kernproblem dieses Friedensversuchs. Anstatt die zunehmend schwindende Rolle Österreich-Ungarns im europäischen Kräftegleichgewicht zu sichern, hebt der Sixtus-Versuch die größten Schwächen des Habsburgerreiches hervor.

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INTRODUCTION

„Keine Großmacht kann auf die Dauer im Widerspruch mit den Interessen ihres eigenen Volkes an dem Wortlaut irgendeines Vertrages kleben, sie ist schließlich genötigt, ganz offen zu erklären: die Zeiten haben sich geändert, ich kann das nicht mehr - und muss das vor ihrem Volke und vor dem vertragschließenden Teile nach Möglichkeit rechtfertigen. Aber das eigene Volk ins Verderben zu führen an dem Buchstaben eines unter ganz anderen Umständen unterschriebenen Vertrages, das wird keine Großmacht gutheißen. Das liegt aber in diesen Verträgen in keiner Weise drin.“ ~ Otto von Bismarck, Reichstagsrede vom 6. Februar 1888¹

The alliance between Austria-Hungary and Germany was perhaps the most outwardly sensible of any among the Great Powers at the start of the First World War. Whereas the initial Entente was composed political entities with three different languages and political ideologies, the Central Powers shared not only a language and culture, but also a similarly autocratic political system. Yet much had changed in the first two years of the war. Austria-Hungary, the older and more venerable entity by far, found itself in the role of the junior member of the alliance, dependent on the imperious upstart German Empire for its domestic stability and military victories. The Habsburgs, fighting since the outset of the war for the continued existence of their empire and dynasty, saw their chances for survival and autonomy slipping away on all fronts. The Austro-German alliance, established in 1879 on Bismarck's initiative between the two recent enemies, and effusively labelled the *Nibelungentreue* in a speech to the Reichstag by Chancellor Bernhard Fürst von Bülow in 1909,² had, at least for one side, outlived its usefulness.

By the beginning of 1917, Austria-Hungary's initial war aims had been accomplished. It defeated and occupied Serbia in 1915; by the end of 1916 it had defeated Romania as well. Albeit with heavy losses and much support from Germany, the k. u. k. Armee did not collapse completely in the face of advancing Russian troops, nor did it give ground on the Italian front. Austria-Hungary needed no further conquests to justify its participation in the world war. At this point, it was only holding off invasion. The general war situation moreover was in a state of tremendous flux. To break the stalemate on the western front, Germany was prepared to escalate the conflict by resorting to unrestricted submarine warfare. Doing so was an unpopular move, and risked bringing neutral nations into the war

¹ Quoted from Hugo *Hantsch*, Österreichs Friedensbemühungen 1916/18 (Brixlegg 1938) 14.

² Franz von *Liszt*, Von der Nibelungentreue. Rede am 18. November 1914 (Berlin 1914) 25-26

on the side of the Entente, most likely the United States of America. 1917 also saw the overthrow of the Russian tsar, foreshadowing the collapse of the Russian front.

Changes in the war brought about reassessments of war aims and current policy. Austria-Hungary stood to gain little from continued participation, and had much to lose. Yet the terms of the alliance with Germany dictated the empire's action, moreover the war against Italy was a popular one, if unrelated to Austria-Hungary's original objectives. By fulfilling its duties, Austria-Hungary faced two negative possibilities. It would either exhaust itself trying to keep pace with the stronger warring powers, or by binding its fate to that of Germany, Austria-Hungary would find itself at the mercy of the Entente if the Central Powers lost. For these, among other reasons, it seemed worthwhile to explore the possibility of exiting the war, as part of a general peace or in the form of a separate one.

Sixtus Peace Attempts

Prince Sixtus of Bourbon-Parma was engaged in efforts to secure a separate peace for Austria-Hungary from the outset of the war; his approaches, perhaps in accordance with his royal station, did not make use of conventional diplomatic channels. Yet in the early years of the war, despite Austria-Hungary's continual struggle to keep up with the other warring powers, the chances of disengagement were very slim. With the death of the old emperor Franz Joseph in November 1916, a window of opportunity opened, as the new emperor, the 29-year-old Karl, immediately proclaimed his willingness for peace.

At the beginning of March 1917, Sixtus sketched out a basis to begin peace negotiations to the French government, speaking directly with the French President Raymond Poincare and Aristide Briand, who served as Prime Minister and Foreign Minister. Four proposals were set out: the territory of Alsace-Lorraine, conquered by Germany in 1870, would be returned to France; the restoration of Belgium's independence; Serbia was to be established as an independent kingdom with access to the sea; and Austria-Hungary would "disinterest" itself from Constantinople – in effect allowing the city to be handed over to the Russians. Sixtus presented a note from Graf Ottokar Czernin, the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister, which was deemed unsatisfactory by the recipients, as well as his own ideas for a possible peace.³

³ Wolfgang Steglich, *Die Friedenspolitik der Mittelmächte 1917/1918*, Bd. 1, (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1964) 21.

Sixtus' own points however, which were presented as coming directly from Kaiser Karl, showed some promise, though all involved worried that the negotiations would founder on the issue of Italy. Briand and Poincare made plans to inform their allies, England and Russia about the possibility of a secret truce with Austria-Hungary. Significant doubts remained; a diary entry from Poincare at this time revealed his skepticism that Austria could persuade Germany to give up Alsace-Lorraine.⁴ The other proposals invoked similar trepidation; Austria-Hungary in essence offered to concede what it could not, and to negotiate where it had no power.

The scope of the peace attempts proved to be an immediate issue. In talks with Karl, whose desire to mediate a general peace was well-known, Sixtus framed his letter as aimed towards securing a "Vermittler" role for Austria-Hungary. While presenting his plans to the French government, a separate peace was emphasized instead. A separate peace was doubtless the more modest proposal, and is more in line with Entente goals of defeating Germany; it would at the very least deprive Germany of its ally, and in the best case, put it in an unwinnable geostrategic position. The prince's decision, moreover, reflects the changing position of Austria-Hungary in Europe. Sixtus' attempt to present a separate peace might be taken as an admittance that Austria-Hungary was no longer a great power capable of mediating between other great powers, and, in the interests of its own survival, was best served by acting as a junior partner to stronger nations.

Though Sixtus presented his letter to the French heads of state and government, his effort was at its core intensely familial and would be seen by its recipients as such. The Bourbon-Parma family connections opened avenues not only to France and Italy, but also to the neutral Spain, which itself had a Bourbon monarch on the throne. Lloyd George considered Sixtus' mission a Parma "family project"⁵ that had gained the backing of the Austro-Hungarian Kaiser. Poincare attributed the initiative to Sixtus himself,⁶ thereby diminishing Habsburg involvement in the proceedings. Sixtus himself, in a memorandum to the French president on the 5th of March, claimed that at this point in the war, "there was no hope of

⁴ *Steglich*, Die Friedenspolitik der Mittelmächte 1917/1918, Bd. 1, 21.

⁵ Robert A. *Kann*, Die Sixtusaffäre und die Geheimen Friedensverhandlungen Österreich-Ungarn im Ersten Weltkrieg (Wien 1996) 60.

⁶ *Kann*, Die Sixtusaffäre und die Geheimen Friedensverhandlungen Österreich-Ungarn, 60.

succeeding through diplomatic channels, so long as both Italy and Germany were directly interested in the failure of such a scheme;”⁷ by opening secret negotiations with France, he hoped to bypass technical obstructions posed, perhaps, by more modern methods.

The front situation did not aid Sixtus in his mission. French intelligence noted that Germany was withdrawing some of its troops on the western front, adding weight to the assumption of a combined offensive against Italy.⁸ Such action would be detrimental to peace negotiations between France and Austria-Hungary should Italy call on France for reinforcements. The proposed armistice “must bind Austria upon all her fronts; for a safeguard was needed against the very real menace of a combined Austro-German attack on Italy.”⁹ Therefore, Sixtus’ first task was to convince Karl to call off the offensive, which he did. At the end of April, Polzer-Hoditz reports on Sixtus’ hopes that the Kaiser might be able to get negotiations with Italy through the Entente.¹⁰ By this point, the situation had changed; America was set to enter the war on the side of the Entente, and Austria-Hungary’s desperation grew. Lloyd George, according to Polzer-Hoditz, was of the opinion that Italy’s territorial aspirations could be reduced,¹¹ presumably to the effect of facilitating a separate peace with Austria-Hungary.

Hardly a major front, Italy was not of immediate importance to the most powerful belligerents and was somewhat of a sideshow from the main action. At worst, it was a distraction. Yet since Austria’s defeats during the Italian Wars of Independence, there existed great popular sentiment to “right the wrong of Solferino” and defeat a historic enemy. The resulting psychological importance of this front may explain why Austrian territorial concessions to Italy do not feature in any of the peace proposals, although they would likely have made considerable impact. It was the express aim of Austria-Hungary, and perhaps its only remaining war aim, to uphold its territorial integrity; for this reason it chose not to set what could have been its trump card on the negotiations table. It appears as though the Austro-Hungarian politicians consciously made the decision to avoid negotiations with Italy; that Italy, as dangerous as it was, might have been convinced by either France or Austria-

⁷ Georges de Manteyer (Hg.), *Austria’s Peace Offer 1916-1917* (London 1921) 37f.

⁸ Manteyer, *Austria’s Peace Offer*, 62f.

⁹ Manteyer, *Austria’s Peace Offer*, 62f.

¹⁰ Arthur Graf Polzer-Hoditz, *Kaiser Karl. aus der Geheimmappe seines Kabinettschefs.* (Wien² 1980) 347.

¹¹ Polzer-Hoditz, *Kaiser Karl*, 347.

Hungary to leave the war with only modest territorial gains. The Austro-Hungarian obsession with territorial integrity, however, precluded even the slightest concession.

Sixtus' note was taken seriously enough by the French statesmen that they informed the English king, the Russian tsar, and Lloyd George.¹² From Sixtus' own account of the Austrian court, it appears that most were in agreement with his plan, save Czernin, who wanted peace, but balked at breaking with Germany. Karl was wholly supportive of the four points, reiterated his desire for peace at any price, and as soon as possible.¹³ Despite these expressed sentiments, Karl made no steps towards a ceasefire with Italy, although the opportunity to do so arose. On the French side, the relatively receptive Prime Minister Aristide Briand was replaced by Alexandre Ribot, who was markedly less interested in peace with Austria-Hungary. Scheduled talks on the Entente side to reason with Italy also fell through. By June 1917, Sixtus had officially failed in his attempt, and at the end of the month, he rejoined the Belgian army.

Research Questions

The genesis of the Sixtus Brief raises the following points. To what extent was it influenced by an assessment of the international situation in the spring of 1917 and possible courses of action? Can it be contextualized as an act of desperation, either as a preventative measure against the revolt shaking other areas of Eastern Europe, or simply resulting from Austria-Hungary's inability to continue fighting an escalating war? Concurrent with the Sixtus negotiations in May 1917, labor unrest had developed into riots over food and wages in the city of Vienna,¹⁴ surely placing further pressure on the Kaiser. Were the Sixtus attempts the result of lessons learned in the war up to that point, mainly on the nature of the alliance between Austria-Hungary and Germany? Germany, Austria-Hungary had learned, was only interested in an advantageous peace, and was fully prepared to fight until victory was achieved, whatever the cost. Or were Karl and Sixtus picking up on the possible openness of the French government, in particular the Prime Minister Aristide Briand, as well as the

¹² *Polzer-Hoditz*, *Kaiser Karl*, 326.

¹³ *Manteyer*, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 73.

¹⁴ *Holger Herwig*, *The First World War. Germany and Austria-Hungary 1914-1918*. (London/New York¹ 1997) 283.

British Prime Minister Lloyd George, to the prospect of a separate peace with Austria-Hungary?

The subsequent failure of the attempt generates more questions. Did it fail because of the way in which the points were presented, i.e. was dynastic diplomacy outdated? The attempt of a Kaiser and a prince to change the course of the war that heralded the true beginning of the twentieth century, an attempt using nineteenth century means, can easily be seen as anachronistic. But was it? Dividing lines in historical epochs can only be made with the benefit of hindsight, and it would be difficult, if impossible, to ascertain whether Sixtus' arrival in republican France was doomed from the outset. Was timing an issue, but in a different sense? While Sixtus negotiated, Briand was replaced by Ribot, who was considerably less sympathetic to the prospect of an Austrian separate peace. The United States of America entered the war on the side of the Entente on April 6, 1917, a development that would decisively turn the tide of the war against the Central Powers.¹⁵ This new addition to the Entente offset the collapsing Russian front as the revolution gathered steam, and breathed new life into the French and British war efforts. Peace, in the minds of all the belligerents, was only to be striven for when victory could not be attained, and Sixtus' offer of peace may have been seen as unnecessary to a reinvigorated Entente.

Lastly, regardless of the outcome, the Sixtus peace attempts give a snapshot of the decision process and mindset of the Austro-Hungarian high command. In particular, it provides an intriguing perspective on the state of the Habsburg-Hohenzollern alliance. The Sixtus peace negotiations, if we choose to summarize them as an attempt to ally Austria-Hungary with the western Entente powers and against Germany, radically reimagine the role of the Habsburg Empire within Europe. Even as the prelude to a general peace attempt, should Karl achieve his goal of acting as mediator between the Entente and Germany, the role of Austria-Hungary would be different and perhaps more powerful than it was before 1914. Either way, the terms and aim of the Sixtus Brief lead Austria-Hungary away from the danger of becoming a satellite state of Germany, and would have substantially raised its international profile. As

¹⁵ *Polzer-Hoditz*, *Kaiser Karl*, 315. Polzer-Hoditz indicates in his memoirs that the Austro-Hungarian high command considered the die cast as soon as the United States declared war on Germany. Germany, for its part, did not believe that American troops could be mobilized fast enough to have an impact on the war.

such, the missive struck a blow in favor of Austria-Hungary's postwar relevance at a time when this was becoming doubtful.

Methodology

The first sections of this thesis concern themselves with contextualization. They build up a basis of assumptions and norms that influenced Prinz Sixtus and Kaiser Karl, and attempt to depict the opportunities available to Austria-Hungary as of early spring 1917. First to be examined is the failed Central Powers attempt to open peace negotiations with the Entente in December of 1916. This overture, instigated by the Austro-Hungarian foreign minister as a peace attempt by the entire *Vierbund*, but ultimately reworked and presented to the Entente by the German chancellor depicts a certain disjointedness within the alliance. To a large extent, the entire episode argues in favor of the secret, autonomous tactics later used by Sixtus and Karl. The second chapter further contextualizes the war situation from the Austro-Hungarian perspective in the winter and spring of 1917. Here it is demonstrated that ending the war became a growing necessity for the Donaumonarchie, in light of domestic unrest, lending support to Karl's timing of the secret peace attempt. Moreover it is shown that the entire war situation stood to change drastically in 1917, due largely to the German decision to escalate the conflict with unrestricted submarine warfare and the subsequent entry of the United States into the war on the side of the Entente. Although the Western front showed every sign of staying active, significant changes to the Southern and Eastern fronts – where Austria-Hungary saw action – gave reason to hope for peace within the year. The contextualization provided by both chapters serve to explain why Sixtus and Karl chose to act at this point, and how they might have hoped for success.

The Sixtus Brief itself is examined in detail in the fourth chapter. Each point and its rationale are discussed, as are the receptiveness of the Entente politicians to which it was presented. Here, the chronology of the events will be subsumed into a topical analysis. Lastly, the thesis will look at the issues which caused the Sixtus peace attempt to fail, and try to pinpoint which factors, both internal and external, doomed it. Using secondary assessments of the Sixtus note, as well as the contextualization and argument outlined in the previous chapters, this thesis aims to argue for the overall validity of the attempt, and its place as a logical diplomatic attempt for Austria-Hungary at this stage in the war. Though it was ultimately

unsuccessful, the outcome should be seen less as a failure on the part of the actual Sixtus initiative, and more as a result of surrounding factors, which were creating an unwinnable situation for Austria-Hungary.

CENTRAL POWERS PEACE ATTEMPT

The peace note released by the Central Powers on the 12th of December 1916 marks the first official attempt to end the war by its major belligerents. In keeping with its official nature, the note made exclusive use of open diplomatic channels, involved all major powers, and presupposed simultaneous action by all members of the *Vierbund*. The experience of conducting negotiations in this manner and the subsequent failure of the attempt may provide some clues to the decisions and tactics of Karl and Sixtus early in 1917, when they chose to act autonomously and in secret.

In October of 1916, Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister Stefan Burian von Rajecz suggested to German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg that the Central Powers consider putting forth a bid for peace.¹⁶ At this point in the war, Austria-Hungary had experienced a remarkable reversal of fortune for the worse, whereas Germany's situation, though hardly positive, was relatively static. Austria-Hungary's particular misfortune centered primarily on a setback that had enormous psychological and tactical repercussions for its army. The Russian offensive led by Aleksei Brusilov that summer had delivered crushing defeat to the k. u. k. Army, virtually eliminating Austria-Hungary's capacity to utilize its military in an independent and autonomous manner. Shortly after the setback, the k. u. k. Army was officially placed under German command in the form of the Oberste Kriegsleitung.¹⁷

This loss of independence, exacerbated by material shortages and dissatisfaction on the home front, provide ample explanation for the occurrence of peace feelers at this time. Despite the German stalemate at Verdun, these sentiments were, in this context, confined to Austria-Hungary. This peace attempt, as originally conceived by Burian, was in effect an expression of desperation, yet its reformulation and presentation to the Entente by Germany removed all hints of vulnerability. Negotiations, as done by Germany, were merely another route to a *Siegfrieden*. But the failure of the December peace attempts was also a failure of the

¹⁶ 4058/908394-413 N° 347 Note de Bethmann-Hollweg, 18. 10.1916. In: André Scherer, Jacques Grunewald, L'Allemagne et les Problèmes de la Paix. Pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale, Bd. 1. (Paris 1962) 517-519, here 517.

¹⁷ The individual military forces of each of the Central Powers were placed under command of the German Kaiser on September 7th, 1916. For more information on the Oberste Kriegsleitung, see Manfred Rauchensteiner, *Der Tod des Doppeladlers. Österreich-Ungarn und der Erste Weltkrieg* (Graz/Köln/Wien¹ 1993), 362-370.

international system. Within this system and within these norms, it proved impossible even to open negotiations, let alone secure peace. Austria-Hungary, which had for all intents and purposes initiated the peace attempt in good faith and with genuine hope for a resolution to the conflict, found itself instead trapped in the bellicose rhetoric of its ally. The note, in effect a statement that the Central Powers were ready, willing, and able to continue and win the war, misrepresented Austria-Hungary. The failure of the overture was a clear signal to the empire that it could not depend on the major belligerents to put a stop to the bloodshed, and it implicitly gave credence to the idea of a separate peace. Germany, moreover, could not be counted on to act in the interest of its allies. Austria-Hungary, if it desired peace, would have to act autonomously and outside of conventional diplomatic channels.¹⁸

The Genesis of a Peace Proposal in Late Autumn of 1916

Setbacks: Verdun and the Brusilov Offensive

The year 1916 started out well for the Central Powers. Germany began in February what it hoped to be a breakthrough at Verdun. As late as May 1916, Germany and Austria-Hungary even seemed to have the upper hand.¹⁹ Yet the offensive at Verdun morphed rapidly into a nightmare of unprecedented proportions. Both the German and French armies expended enormous amounts of manpower for minimal territorial gain for almost the entirety of the year. In December, the end finally came - a tactical though Pyrrhic victory for France.

On the Eastern Front, the situation was equally devastating for the Central Powers. Austria-Hungary's successes against the Italians and in the Balkans were tempered by the devastating Brusilov Offensive and by the belated entry of Romania into the war on the side of the Entente. Though Romania was dispatched with relative swiftness, the Brusilov Offensive

¹⁸ This would be explicitly stated by the German diplomat Werner Freiherr von Grünau after the peace attempt failed. Grünau is proposing an answer to a telegram from Karl that expresses a critical view of German actions regarding the Entente refusal of the peace attempt. Karl doesn't want this to be the end of peace attempts and writes "[v]erzeihe dem so viel jüngeren, treuen Freunde und Bundesgenossen, wenn er sich mit der Bitte an Dich wendet, nochmals einen diplomatischen Versuch zu unternehmen, bevor wir zu unseren Soldaten sprechen und dadurch die Brücken zu einem Verständigungsversuche definitiv abbrechen." Grünau answers this with the statement „Wir können also nur noch auf inoffiziellem Wege Verständigungsversuche unternehmen. Wie dies zu machen ist, darüber mögen sich unsere Diplomaten einigen.“ 4058/909884-7 N° 456 Grünau à l'Office des Affaires Etrangères, télégramme, 2. 1. 1917, 3. 1. 1917. In: André Scherer, Jacques Grunewald (Hg.), *L'Allemagne et les Problèmes de la Paix. Pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale*, Bd. 1. (Paris 1962) 656f, here 656f.

¹⁹ *Rauchensteiner*, *Der Tod des Doppeladlers*, 346.

marked a sea change for the k. u. k. Armee. The massive Russian offensive broke the backbone of the Austro-Hungarian armed forces, and with this blow, the empire lost all pretention of military power and autonomous action.

The Brusilov Offensive definitively marked the end of Austria-Hungary's status as a Great Power,²⁰ turning Austro-Hungarian fears of German domination, which had been festering under the surface since the beginning of the war, into reality. The creation of the *Oberste Kriegsleitung* on the 7th of September, 1916, codified the end of Austro-Hungarian military independence. This institution effectively placed the command of the separate militaries of *Vierbund* members under the command of the German Kaiser. Such a centralization of power could be dangerous, and the *Oberste Kriegsleitung* aroused suspicion as an instrument that could be used against the Habsburg monarchy, and certainly against any attempts of Austria-Hungary to decide for itself the course it wished to take.²¹ Though Karl, upon his ascension to the throne of Austria-Hungary was displeased, he did not make any attempts to dismantle the arrangement.²²

Burian's peace initiative in November and Bethmann-Hollweg's formulation

On the 18th of October 1916, Bethmann-Hollweg recorded statements by the Austro-Hungarian foreign minister Burian at a conference in Pless, indicating that should the offensive against Romania begin to wind down and great enemy offensives cease, Austria-Hungary would lose interest in the general fighting.²³ The chancellor paraphrases Burian's statements in Pless:

²⁰ Herwig, *The First World War*, 213-217. Herwig specifically cites the crushing Austrian defeat at Lutsk as the defining event. He further notes that the debacle also wrecked Conrad's reputation, moreover that the ever-growing dependence of Vienna on Berlin might be measured by debt – Austria-Hungary owed Germany 2.5 billion marks by September of 1916.

²¹ *Rauchensteiner*, *Der Tod des Doppeladlers*, 365. Rauchensteiner argues that it was an instrument that could be used against Austria-Hungary.

²² Christopher Brennan, *Reforming Austria-Hungary. Beyond his control or beyond his capacity? The domestic policies of Emperor Karl I November 1916 – May 1917* (ungedr. geisteswiss. Diss. London 2012) 50.

²³ In this note, Bethmann-Hollweg summarizes Burian's statement at a conference in Pless. "Wenn mit dem Beginn des Winters eine Pause in den großen Offensiven unserer Feinde eintrete und der rumänische Feldzug zu einem gewissen Abschluss gekommen sein werde, müssten wir den Ersuch machen, ohne Preisgabe wesentlicher Lebensinteressen ein Ende des Krieges herbeizuführen. Dauere der Krieg fort, so würden wir im nächsten Jahr einer noch größeren Offensive unsere Feinde gegenüberstehen als in diesem Sommer. Selbst wenn wir sie siegreich abwiesen, würden wir damit keinen unserer Feinde zum Frieden zwingen, selbst aber dem Erschöpfungszustande nahe sein, also schlechter dastehen als jetzt. Die Verantwortung gegen unsere eigenen Länder zwingt uns also dazu, selbst einen Schritt zum Frieden zu tun." 4058/908394-413 N° 347 Note de

Wir sollten nicht die Friedensvermittlung eines oder aller Neutralen anrufen, weil solche Vermittlung stets eine uns wahrscheinlich abträgliche Stellungnahme des Vermittelnden zu den Friedensbedingungen in sich schließen würde. Wohl aber sollten wir die Neutralen bitten, unser konkret ausgedrücktes Friedensangebot unsern Feinden zu *übermitteln*.²⁴

Burian's argument is clear: continuing the war will only lead to ever greater offensives and greater exhaustion. Better to end the war now, before all advantages had been lost.²⁵ The neutrals, he allowed, might be useful in transmitting the peace note to the Entente, but the actual *Friedensbedingungen* should presumably come from Germany and Austria-Hungary. Here the Austrian desire to end the war comes directly in conflict with a refusal to relinquish control over the course of events. If the war was proving impossible to win, or at least impossible to win conclusively, a bid for peace on their own terms amounted to a victory. In addition to the emphasis on concluding peace from a position of strength, or at least conveying this to their opponents as well as to neutral nations, Burian and Bethmann-Hollweg formulated a second prong to their approach: Should the Entente refuse to conclude peace on these terms, they alone would be guilty of prolonging the war.²⁶

Understandable in a war fought at least in part to preserve honor, the question of cowardice assumed paramount concern. Burian addressed this in his initial suggestion, but emphasized that this view was held only by a small minority, whose desires could not and should not be satisfied by responsible politicians.²⁷ Bethmann-Hollweg's note records Burian's sketches of

Bethmann-Hollweg, 18. 10. 1916. In: André Scherer, Jacques Grunewald, *L'Allemagne et les Problèmes de la Paix. Pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale*, Bd. 1. (Paris 1962) 517-519, here 517.

²⁴ 4058/908394-413 N° 347 Note de Bethmann-Hollweg, 18. 10. 1916. In: André Scherer, Jacques Grunewald, *L'Allemagne et les Problèmes de la Paix. Pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale*, Bd. 1. (Paris 1962) 517-519, here 517.

²⁵ In his own report of the meeting, Burian is far more pessimistic on the outlook for the Central Powers, discussing at length the problem of war-weariness and material shortages. III. Nr. 5383 Geheim Notiz für die kaiserlich deutsche Botschaft, 30. 10. 1916. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv I, Botschaftsarchiv Berlin / Geheime Korrespondenzen 1914-1918 betreffend / Vertrag mit Bulgarien, Ausbau des Bündnisses mit Deutschland / Friedensdemarche / Karton 536.

²⁶ The proposed peace note's effect on neutrals and on civilians of the enemy countries was part of the discussion from the beginning. Both Burian and Bethmann-Hollweg seem intent on improving the image of the Central Powers. This is directly indicated in a note from Bethmann-Hollweg to Wilhelm II. "Ist das Wort Friede einmal gefallen, würde die Sehnsucht nach der Beendigung des Krieges bei den feindlichen Völkern noch wesentlich gestärkt werden. Das Odium der endlosen Verlängerung des Krieges würde den Feinden aufgeladen." 4058/908492-5 N° 363 Bethmann-Hollweg à Guillaume II (¹). Télégramme, 4. 11. 1916. In: André Scherer, Jacques Grunewald, *L'Allemagne et les Problèmes de la Paix. Pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale*, Bd. 1. (Paris 1962) 545f, here 545.

²⁷ Note de Bethmann-Hollweg, 517.

Austro-Hungarian peace terms, chief among these being “Volle territorial Integrität der vier verbündeten Mächte.”²⁸ The Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister was careful to avoid obstructing or putting any limits on the goals of Germany with his peace conditions. Ten days later, Bethmann-Hollweg, in a telegram to the Austrian ambassador, advocated that the four allied powers simultaneously and separately send identical notes to the Entente, signaling their readiness for peace.²⁹ Bethmann-Hollweg then addressed the problem set out by Burian at the beginning – cowardice - arguing that the Central Powers should take steps to end the war, while in no way backing down from the military conflict.³⁰

While seemingly of cosmetic concern, any sign of weakness on the part of the Central Powers would have serious consequences. Burian indicated as much in his own notes on the meeting to the k. u. k. embassy in Berlin.³¹ Though he admitted that the impetus for a peace attempt came in part from the immense economic strain the war placed on Austria-Hungary, he realized that any overture to the Entente might be interpreted as an admission of weakness, and thus encouragement to fight even harder.³² The result of these concerns led the Central Powers to err perhaps too strongly on the side of caution, and powerfully indicate that they could indeed continue and even win the war.

²⁸ Streng geheim « Skizze der vorzuschlagenden Friedensbedingungen » 248 Burianischer Gegenvorschlag. In Nr. 5609 Friedensaktion 2 beilagen. Polit: no. 414, 20. 11. 1916. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv I, Botschaftsarchiv Berlin / Geheime Korrespondenzen 1914-1918 betreffend / Vertrag mit Bulgarien, Ausbau des Bündnisses mit Deutschland / Friedensdemarche / Karton 536.

²⁹ 4058/908427-31 N° 353 Projet de télégramme de Bethmann-Hollweg à l'Ambassade de Vienne (¹), 28.10. 1916. In: André Scherer, Jacques Grunewald, *L'Allemagne et les Problèmes de la Paix. Pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale*, Bd. 1. (Paris 1962) 532-534, here 533.

³⁰ Projet de télégramme de Bethmann-Hollweg à l'Ambassade de Vienne, 533f.

³¹ III. Nr. 5383 Geheim / Notiz für die kaiserlich deutsche Botschaft, 30. 10. 1916. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv I, Botschaftsarchiv Berlin / Geheime Korrespondenzen 1914-1918 betreffend / Vertrag mit Bulgarien, Ausbau des Bündnisses mit Deutschland / Friedensdemarche / Karton 536.

³² „.... Die Note in dieser Form und in diesem Augenblick würde von unseren Feinden als Bitte um den Frieden aufgefasst werden. Wenn die englischen Minister vor kurzem abermals ihrer Kriegsentschlossenheit bis zum endgültigen Siege und ihre bekannten Bedingungen hochmütig verkündeten und sofort darauf ein Anbot der Zentralmächte auf Friedensverhandlungen ohne irgend eine Andeutung einer Basis für dieselben bei ihnen einlief, so könnte das bei unseren Feinden doch nur den Eindruck eines Eingehens auf ihren Standpunkt hervorrufen und sie in der ungünstigen Beurteilung unserer Lage und in der Überzeugung bekräftigen, dass wir an der Grenze unserer Widerstandsfähigkeit angelangt sind. Die Wirkung wäre die Bestärkung indem Entschlusse, uns völlig niederzuringen, bestenfalls die Einladung, unsere Friedensbevollmächtigten zu entsenden, um unsere Vorschläge zu hören, die ja wohl wenig Aussicht auf Annahme hätten, wenn sie nicht so bescheiden wären, wie sich das für Frieden Bittende geziemt.“ III. Nr. 5383 Geheim / Notiz für die kaiserlich deutsche Botschaft, 30. 10. 1916. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv I, Botschaftsarchiv Berlin / Geheime Korrespondenzen 1914-1918 betreffend / Vertrag mit Bulgarien, Ausbau des Bündnisses mit Deutschland / Friedensdemarche / Karton 536.

The exact formulation and points addressed in the note were contested between the Chancellor and the Foreign Minister. Burian was of the opinion that concrete terms should be published along with the peace proposal, ostensibly to remove the threat of misinformation.³³ Bethmann-Hollweg, anticipating the difficulty of getting the Vierbund to act in unison, felt that a simple invitation to negotiations would suffice,³⁴ anticipating a later note by the American president. Burian eventually gave ground and the German plan was followed. From the German Chief of the General Staff Paul von Hindenburg's own notes, it is clear that the balance may have been tipping away from peace and towards the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare even before the peace note was sent off.³⁵ Bethmann-Hollweg was careful to consult with Hindenburg regarding the optimal time to attempt peace, claiming he would only go through with the attempt if it benefitted the military.³⁶ To this aim, Prinz Hohenlohe, stationed at the Austro-Hungarian embassy in Berlin, implicitly addressed concerns of weakness by trying to link the fall of Bucharest to *Vierbund* troops with the peace note in early December.³⁷ A *Siegfrieden* of sorts needed to be achieved, peace should, for the Central Powers, spring from victory. By the end of December, Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff were pressing the chancellor to remember his commitment to allow them to reopen the *U-Boot Krieg*.³⁸

³³ Esther Caukin *Brunauer*, The Peace Proposals of December, 1916 – January, 1917. In: *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Dec., 1932) 544-571, here 556.

³⁴ *Brunauer*, The Peace Proposals of December, 556.

³⁵ 4058/908976 N° 415 Note de Hindenburg, 8. 12. 1916. In: André Scherer, Jacques Grunewald, *L'Allemagne et les Problèmes de la Paix. Pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale*, Bd. 1. (Paris 1962) 609, here 609.

³⁶ „Ob und wann das Friedensangebot gemacht wird, entscheidet sich ausschließlich nach der militärischen Lage. In dieser Beziehung erscheint mir als notwendige Voraussetzung die Erreichung eines gewissen Höhepunktes, der jedoch noch nicht in einen stationären Zustand überzugehen droht und gleichzeitige menschenmögliche Sicherheit vor etwaigen für die Gesamtlage entscheidenden Rückschlägen. Ob deshalb die angekündigte große italienische Offensive gegen Triest und, falls auch sie zu erwarten ist, die russische Offensive an der siebenbürgischen Nordostfront ohne Rücksicht auf unser Vorgehen in der Walachei zuvor abgewartet werden muss, kann wohl nur militärisch beurteilt werden. 4058/908756-9 N° 396 Bethmann-Hollweg à Hindenburg, 27. 11. 1916. In: André Scherer, Jacques Grunewald, *L'Allemagne et les Problèmes de la Paix. Pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale*, Bd. 1. (Paris 1962) 580f, here 580f.

³⁷ No. 386 Prinz Hohenlohe an Baron Burian, 3. 12. 1916. III. Nr. 5383 Geheim /Notiz für die kaiserlich deutsche Botschaft, 30. 10. 1916. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv I, Botschaftsarchiv Berlin / Geheime Korrespondenzen 1914-1918 betreffend / Vertrag mit Bulgarien, Ausbau des Bündnisses mit Deutschland / Friedensdemarche / Karton 536.

³⁸ *Brunauer*, The Peace Proposals of December, 567.

The Peace Attempt of December 12th, 1916

The note transmitted to the neutrals on the 12th of December 1916 opened with a general appeal to pacifism. This war, the worst in Europe's history, was detrimental to the progress and development of so great a civilization. No regional distinctions are drawn. Only in the second paragraph is the case of the Central Powers presented. The military efforts and solidarity of all members of the *Vierbund* are praised, in particular the recent Austrian success in the Balkans. The assessment of the Central Powers' fighting capacity ends on a positive; they have scored recent military victories and expect the trend to continue. The Central Powers, in their own words, were fighting a war of self-defense against an aggressive opponent bent on territorial aggrandizement and destroying their way of life. In stark contrast to the Entente, it is implied, the Central Powers have no desire to dismember or annihilate their opponents. The onus of war guilt is first here placed on the Entente nations, whose belligerence forced the Central Powers to take up arms in the first place. With this explicit implication of guilt, the Central Powers then frame their own case in moral terms. Though ready and able to fight all the way to victory, they take the nobler route, condemning the bloodshed and appealing to humanitarian instincts. Peace, they argue, should be concluded at the first possible moment and should secure the integrity and freedom of all parties involved. The peace note ends with a barely-veiled threat. Should the Entente fail to accept the as-yet-unstated terms offered by the Central Powers, the *Vierbund* would fight until victory is achieved, whatever the cost. The Entente would for its stubbornness have to answer to history and humanity for prolonging the bloodshed.³⁹

³⁹ STRENG GEHEIM Polit no 435, Praes 6. XII

Herr Geschäftsträger!

Der furchtbarste Krieg, den die Geschichte je gesehen hat, wütet seit bald zwei und einem halben Jahr in einem großen Teil der Welt. Diese Katastrophe, die das Band einer gemeinsamen tausendjährigen Zivilisation nicht hat aufhalten können trifft die Menschheit in ihren wertvollsten Errungenschaften. Sie droht den geistigen und materiellen Fortschritt, der den Stolz Europas zu Beginn des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts bildete, in Trümmer zu legen.

Deutschland und seine Verbündeten, Österreich-Ungarn, Bulgarien und die Türkei, haben in diesem Kampf ihre unüberwindliche Kraft erwiesen. Sie haben über ihre an Zahl und Kriegsmaterial überlegenen Gegner gewaltige Erfolge errungen. Unerschütterlich halten ihre Linien den immer wiederholten Angriffen der Heere ihrer Feinde stand. Der jüngste Ansturm im Balkan ist schnell und siegreich niedergeworfen worden. Die letzten Ereignisse beweisen, dass auch eine weitere Fortdauer des Krieges ihre Widerstandskraft nicht zu brechen vermag, dass vielmehr die gesamte Lage zu der Erwartung weiterer Erfolge berechtigt.

Zu Verteidigung ihres Daseins und ihrer nationalen Entwicklungsfreiheit wurden die vier verbündeten Mächte gezwungen, zu den Waffen zu greifen. Auch die Ruhmestaten ihrer Heere haben daran nichts geändert. Stets

Failure of the Peace Attempts

The invitation sent on December 12th was refused by the Russians three days later, and by the French and British on December 30th.⁴⁰ The official response addressed to the Central Powers by the Entente left little room for further discussion. Rejecting at once any allegations of culpability,⁴¹ the Entente places the responsibility of causing the war squarely on the shoulders of the Central Powers, taking care to mention specific incidences and specific causalities.⁴² In response to indictments of Entente conduct and claims of its own humanity, the Entente note cites the case of Belgium, whose neutrality Germany violated, and in the words of the Entente, continues to treat in a brutal, unjust manner.⁴³ Germany, it

haben sie an der Überzeugung festgehalten, dass ihrer eigenen Rechte und begründeten Ansprüche in keinem Widerspruch zu den Rechten der anderen Nationen stehen. Sie gehen nicht drauf aus, ihre Gegner zu zerschmettern oder zu vernichten.

Getragen von dem Bewusstsein ihrer militärischen und wirtschaftlichen Kraft und bereit, den ihnen aufgezwungenen Kampf nötigenfalls bis zum äußersten fortzusetzen, zugleich aber von dem Wunsch beseelt, weiteres Blutvergießen zu verhüten und den Greueln des Krieges ein Ende zu machen, schlagen die vier verbündeten Mächte vor, alsbald in Friedensverhandlungen einzutreten. Die Vorschläge, die sie zu diesen Verhandlungen mitbringen werden, und die darauf gerichtet sind, Dasein, Ehre und Entwicklungsfreiheit ihrer Völker zu sichern, bilden nach ihrer Überzeugung eine geeignete Grundlage für die Herstellung eines dauerhaften Friedens.

Wenn trotz dieses Anerbietens zu Frieden und Versöhnung der Kampf fort dauern sollte, so sind die vier verbündeten Mächte entschlossen, ihn bis zum siegreichen Ende zu führen. Sie lehnen aber feierlich jede Verantwortung dafür vor der Menschheit und der Geschichte ab.

Die Kaiserliche Regierung beehrt sich die Regierung der Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika durch Ihre geneigte Vermittlungen zu bitten, diese Mitteilung zur Kenntnis der Regierung der Französischen Republik, sowie der Königlich Großbritannischen, der Kaiserlich Japanischen, der Königlich Rumänischen, der Kaiserlich Russischen und der Königlich Serbischen Regierung bringen zu wollen.

Ich benutze u.s.w RK

“Deutscher Entwurf vom 5. XII“ nr. 5841 Friedensaktion. 1 Beilage, 5. 12. 1916. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv I, Botschaftsarchiv Berlin / Geheime Korrespondenzen 1914-1918 betreffend / Vertrag mit Bulgarien, Ausbau des Bündnisses mit Deutschland / Friedensdemarche / Karton 536.

⁴⁰ Herwig, *The First World War*, 313.

⁴¹ « Avant toute réponse, les puissances alliées tiennent à s'élever hautement contre les deux assertions essentielles de la note des puissances ennemies qui prétend rejeter sur les allies la responsabilité de la guerre et qui proclame la victoire des puissances centrales. » 4058/909804 807-11 N° 451 Le Département politique (suisse) à la Légation de Suisse Berne, 31. 12. 1916. In: André Scherer, Jacques Grunewald, *L'Allemagne et les Problèmes de la Paix. Pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale*, Bd. 1. (Paris 1962) 651-653, here 651.

⁴² « A la Haye c'est le délégué allemand qui avait refusé toute proposition de désarmement en juillet 1914. C'est l'Autriche-Hongrie qui, après avoir adressé à la Serbie un ultimatum sans précédent, lui a déclaré la guerre, malgré les satisfactions immédiatement obtenues. Les empires du centre ont alors repoussé toutes les tentatives faites par l'Entente. » Le Département politique (suisse) à la Légation de Suisse Berne, 652.

⁴³ Le Département politique (suisse) à la Légation de Suisse Berne, 653.

asserted, was a hypocrite, its pretensions of pacifism a front for the inhumanity it perpetrated on the people of Belgium.⁴⁴

The Entente, apparently, saw through the Central Powers attempt, or at the very least, interpreted it in an unfavorable manner. Rather than a heartfelt overture, the Entente saw a calculated attempt to force a “paix allemande”⁴⁵ upon the warring nations of Europe. That no conditions were stated in the note provided cause for further suspicions. The Entente flatly stated “[u]ne suggestion sans conditions pour l’ouverture de négociations n’est pas une offre de paix,”⁴⁶ instead, they found it more reminiscent of a “manœuvre de guerre.”⁴⁷ Later secondary assessments of this episode would likewise frame the Central Powers peace attempt as a military maneuver; its lack of substance giving little basis on which to start negotiations, and its implicit threat to escalate the war all too apparent. For his part, Bethmann-Hollweg was beholden to Hindenburg and Ludendorff, who pushed with increasing fervor for agreement from the Chancellor to resume the *U-Boot Krieg*; Bethmann-Hollweg had promised on the 31st of August to allow the military authorities the freedom to decide when to take this step.⁴⁸ Shortly before the peace note went out, on the 8th of December Hindenburg expressed his desire to put the plan into action by the end of January,⁴⁹ and by December 26th, Bethmann-Hollweg gave him the authority to make the decision.⁵⁰

The aftermath of the Central Powers peace attempts gives the impression that what was really at stake was not peace, but the sympathies of neutral nations. On December 15th, Bethmann-Hollweg expressed his own concerns regarding neutral powers in a telegram to the German embassy in Vienna. He expected the Entente to try to sway public opinion among their own people and also that of neutral countries against the Central Powers.⁵¹ He was not alone in

⁴⁴ « ...au moment où l’Allemagne parle au monde de paix et d’humanité, elle déporte et réduit en servitude des citoyens belges par milliers. » Le Département politique (suisse) à la Légation de Suisse Berne, 653.

⁴⁵ « En réalité l’ouverture faite par les puissances centrales n’est qu’une tentative, calculée en vue d’agir sur l’évolution de la guerre et d’imposer finalement une paix allemande. » Le Département politique (suisse) à la Légation de Suisse Berne, 652.

⁴⁶ Le Département politique (suisse) à la Légation de Suisse Berne, 651.

⁴⁷ Le Département politique (suisse) à la Légation de Suisse Berne, 651

⁴⁸ *Brunauer*, The Peace Proposals of December, 567.

⁴⁹ Note de Hindenburg, 609.

⁵⁰ *Brunauer*, The Peace Proposals of December, 567.

⁵¹ “Die Annahme liegt vielmehr nahe, dass unsere Feinde versuchen werden, uns gegenüber dem neutralen Auslande und zwecks Beeinflussung der öffentlichen Meinung in ihren eigenen Ländern in eine taktisch

his suspicions – in its refusal of the Central Powers overture, the Entente accused Germany of attempting to intimidate neutral public opinion to abandon the defense of human liberty and accept German designs.⁵² Yet as plans for the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare materialized into reality in the beginning of February, it was evident that peace negotiations in any form were a dead letter. Upon receiving the refusal, Bethmann-Hollweg wrote to his Kaiser, describing the reply as “impertinent,”⁵³ and plotting a course of action for the future, one that involved neutral nations. He envisioned a note to the United States, the Scandinavian countries, and Switzerland in which Germany would appear to ask for neutral mediation.⁵⁴ Ever the tactician, the failure of the overture either to firmly implicate the Entente or to lead to actual peace negotiations left an appeal to neutral nations as the only viable option for Bethmann-Hollweg, should he still want to pursue some semblance of his original aims.

Karl, whose ascension to the throne following the death of Franz-Joseph on November 21st, 1916 was wreathed in hopes for peace, viewed the failed peace note as the beginning of a process that would eventually bring peace, whereas his ally saw it as a sign to further escalate the war. The Entente answer to the peace note, he insisted, did not exclude further efforts to end the war.⁵⁵ Peace, moreover, was not only the responsibility of a sovereign to his peoples, but the direction in which the whole world was slowly moving, a development that the Central Powers should fully take part in, as was their duty.⁵⁶ Karl evidently adhered very strongly to the humanitarian sentiments expressed in the original Central Powers note, veiled

ungünstige Lage zu bringen.“ 4058/909143-5 N° 422 Bethmann-Hollweg à l’Ambassade à Vienne. Télégramme, 15. 12. 1916. In: André Scherer, Jacques Grunewald, *L’Allemagne et les Problèmes de la Paix. Pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale*, Bd. 1. (Paris 1962) 617f, here 617.

⁵² Le Département politique (suisse) à la Légation de Suisse Berne, 652.

⁵³ 4058/909799-801 N° 454 Bethmann-Hollweg à Guillaume II, 2. 1. 1917. In: André Scherer, Jacques Grunewald, *L’Allemagne et les Problèmes de la Paix. Pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale*, Bd. 1. (Paris 1962) 654f, here 654f.

⁵⁴ „Ich denke an eine Note an diejenigen Neutralen, welche jetzt ihrerseits Friedensanregungen gemacht hatten, also an Amerika, die Schweiz und die skandinavischen Staaten. Natürlich wird jeder Anschein, als ob wir die Vermittlung dieser Neutralen nachsuchten, strengstens zu vermeiden sein, ebenso jeder Anschein, als ob wir der Entente irgendwie nachliefen.“ Bethmann-Hollweg à Guillaume II, 654f.

⁵⁵ “Die Antwort der Entente, insoweit wir sie kennen, ist zwar in ihren Konklusionen nicht erfreulich, schließt aber doch die Möglichkeit einer weiteren Fortspinnung des Friedensgedankens nicht aus. Mein von Dir gewiss geteiltes Bestreben geht dahin, die in der ganzen Welt bestehende starke Friedensstimmung fortgesetzt zu nähren und auf diese Art im Laufe der Zeit dennoch zu ernststen Friedensverhandlungen zu gelangen. Hierin erblicke Ich auch eine unserer Pflichten gegenüber unsern Völkern und der Menschheit.“ Grünau à l’Office des Affaires Etrangères, 656.

⁵⁶ Grünau à l’Office des Affaires Etrangères, 656.

as they were in nationalistic self-gratification. His perspective was not shared by the German high command, and the diplomat Werner Freiherr von Grünau, working at the German *Auswärtiges Amt* struggled to formulate a satisfactory response.

Germany's eventual response to the idealistic young Austro-Hungarian Kaiser speaks volumes not only about its approach to the war, but also about the alliance itself. Grünau's initial suggestion for a response addresses Karl's humanitarian concerns, turning the Kaiser's logic on its head and arguing that attempting to conclude peace now with the Entente would not be in the best interests of the German or Austrian populace.⁵⁷ Interestingly, Grünau suggests that the only way to continue with trying to reach some form of understanding with the Entente would be through "inoffiziellem Wege,"⁵⁸ that is, future peace attempts would not be done under the official auspices of the Central Powers. He further shows indignation at the conduct of the Entente, saying that this alone forbids the Central Powers from responding directly; they could now only correspond by way of neutral mediation.⁵⁹

Grünau's note does not appear to have reached Karl. Instead, the response came from the original addressee, Wilhelm II, who seems to have taken little notice of Grünau's suggestions save for the statement concerning neutral nations⁶⁰ and bypassed Karl's stated concerns, misinterpreting his note so blatantly that it must have been intentional. He begins his telegram with the statement that he agrees with Karl that the blame for the continuation of the war must be shifted onto the enemy,⁶¹ although this had not been mentioned by the Habsburg. Wilhelm II then continues with saber-rattling and invocations of the sovereign's power to invigorate armies and peoples, emphasizing yet again his confidence in the Central Powers' moral superiority and ability to win the war.⁶² The German Kaiser's telegram closes with a note to his army, one which uses the failed peace attempt as a call to arms,⁶³ and effectively destroys any hope of future peace overtures.

⁵⁷ Grünau à l'Office des Affaires Etrangères, 656.

⁵⁸ Grünau à l'Office des Affaires Etrangères, 656f.

⁵⁹ Grünau à l'Office des Affaires Etrangères, 656f.

⁶⁰ 4058/909976-8 N° 459 Grünau à l'Office des Affaires Etrangères. Télégramme, 4. 1. 1917, 5. 1. 1917. In: André Scherer, Jacques Grunewald, *L'Allemagne et les Problèmes de la Paix. Pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale*, Bd. 1. (Paris 1962) 660f, here 661.

⁶¹ Grünau à l'Office des Affaires Etrangères, 661.

⁶² Grünau à l'Office des Affaires Etrangères, 661.

⁶³ Grünau à l'Office des Affaires Etrangères, 661.

Analysis and Influence

Assessment

The winter peace attempt, on the initiative of Austria-Hungary, displays the empire's dilemma regarding its present alliance and historical place in Europe. Austria-Hungary typified the authoritarian Old Europe, yet as its ability to act autonomously slipped away, an appeal to the vanguard of New Europe beckoned. This was further complicated by Austria-Hungary's dependence on Germany, which, paradoxically, did not earn it an enduring or essential place in the European balance of power.⁶⁴ The monarchy fought from 1879 – when the Dual Alliance with Bismarck's German Empire was enacted – onwards against the perception that it was little more than an appendage of Germany, its various ethnicities violently oppressed and its politics under direction from Berlin.⁶⁵ This was graphically demonstrated by the December peace attempts, in which an Austro-Hungarian idea and initiative was in many ways subverted by the dominant partner in the alliance.

Academic assessments of the Central Powers peace attempt of December 1916 are overwhelmingly negative. The insincerity and swaggering bravado of the text, the failure of the attempt, and the ensuing resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare by Germany all serve to discredit the note. Yet when viewed within its context and in light of subsequent developments, it is possible to make an argument for the attempt's significance, if not for its efficacy. Though Robert Kann believes that the peace attempt was doomed to fail at the outset,⁶⁶ he nonetheless designates it as the beginning of the “second phase of the diplomatic history of the war, [the] Austrian attempt to obtain peace.”⁶⁷ Certainly the so-called “second phase” is characterized by the differences between Austria-Hungary and Germany turning virulent, compromising their capacity to act in concert with each other. Holger Herwig comes to a similar conclusion, depicting the winter of 1916/1917 as a major turning point in the war, yet dismissing the Central Powers' peace effort as “half-hearted.”⁶⁸

⁶⁴ *Rauchensteiner*, *Der Tod des Doppeladlers*, 329.

⁶⁵ *Rauchensteiner*, *Der Tod des Doppeladlers*, 329.

⁶⁶ Robert Kann, *A History of the Habsburg Empire 1526-1918* (Berkeley/London/Los Angeles³ 1980) 474.

⁶⁷ Kann, *A History of the Habsburg Empire*, 474.

⁶⁸ *Herwig*, *The First World War*, 305.

In an article entitled “The Peace Proposals of December 1916 – January 1917,” Esther Caukin Brunauer outlines a rare case in favor of the peace proposals. She argues that both the German peace feelers and the Wilsonian attempts to mediate in the winter of 1916/1917 should be taken as serious, valid attempts to bring about an end to the war. This perspective contrasts starkly with that of Kann, who describes the attempt as “clumsy and arrogant,” ultimately “bound to fail.”⁶⁹ Brunauer believes that the debacle at Verdun was significant enough to register a change of plans for the Germans, whose only hope to gain the upper hand was through the unpopular use of unrestricted submarine warfare.⁷⁰ Brunauer portrays the future course of action by Germany at the end of the year 1916 as a choice between negotiating a peace and pinning chances of victory on submarine warfare.⁷¹⁷² Herwig echoes Brunauer’s assessment that the situation Bethmann-Hollweg had created with the December peace attempt seemed like a “win-win proposition” in which he would be justified to use submarines if the invitation to negotiate was refused.⁷³ The peace attempt as it was presented played to both possible outcomes. The intention of this peace attempt, as reimagined from what appears to be genuine Austrian desires for peace, was to provide a moral counterweight to the German decision to resume unrestricted submarine warfare against Great Britain. It strove for little more than a cosmetic moral victory, and failed to accomplish even that.

Impact on Austro-German relations

Although the presentation of the peace attempt assumes more a defiant German formulation than a desperate Austrian one, the intent and timing reflect the concerns of Austria-Hungary. Austria, not Germany, needed to end the conflict at a time in which it still commanded enough respect to negotiate as a great power. Austria, not Germany, knew that the situation on the battle front and on the home front only stood to get worse, and any further victories would be hollow or would simply delay the inevitable defeat. A distinctly Austrian fatalism emerges, contrasting starkly with still-militant Germany. Either the Austro-Hungarian high command had serious doubts about Germany’s ability to win the war which Germany itself

⁶⁹ Kann, *A History of the Habsburg Empire*, 474.

⁷⁰ Brunauer, *The Peace Proposals of December*, 545.

⁷¹ Brunauer, *The Peace Proposals of December*, 545.

⁷² Brunauer summarizes the entire course of events as a “race between submarine warfare and peace efforts.” Brunauer, *The Peace Proposals of December*, 570.

⁷³ Herwig, *The First World War*, 313.

did not share, or they feared the consequences of a German victory, believing their power and sovereignty to be on the line regardless of which side won. Was this diplomatic attempt characteristic of the Austro-Hungarian Empire under Franz Joseph and Burian? It displays the requisite deference to Germany, moreover, its implicit aim is not to secure a peace, but to place blame. It came from a mindset of maintaining honor at all costs, using bellicose, rather than conciliatory language. It expects and invites failure. Yet as it is the first official peace attempt, it is difficult to deem it indicative of a wider policy style. The change, when it came, encompassed more than the means of attempting peace.

A closer relationship with Germany, particularly in light of its threats to resume unrestricted submarine warfare, was becoming ever more hazardous for Austria-Hungary's international image. Yet such a relationship also offered a modicum of safety to the beleaguered empire. The more closely Austria-Hungary adhered to German war aims and policies, the more military success it could reasonably expect. But as the oft-stated goal of the Entente was to destroy Germany, a closely-allied Austria-Hungary could only expect destruction as well. France and England by this time harbored nationalist agitators pushing these countries' governments to make decisions in favor of national self-determination for the monarchy's various ethnicities. That such pressure was necessary illustrates the complex decision process for France and England in eventually deciding to advocate the breakup of Austria-Hungary, a geopolitical decision that was not in line with their main war aims. Agitators for national self-determination in France and England played primarily to German hatred, arguing that destroying Austria-Hungary, while not an end in and of itself, might serve towards the greater goal of weakening Germany.⁷⁴ Yet in doing so, even the agitators were forced to admit that France and England had no real conflict with Austria-Hungary.⁷⁵ The fulfillment of their demands for national self-determination would be counterintuitive for the Western Powers, who were first and foremost intent on destroying Germany, not its Austrian sideshow.

In a sense, the peace note defined war aims, rather than concessions in the interest of a general peace. In light of the fact that Austria-Hungary's main goal was not necessarily

⁷⁴ This was the angle of Tomas Masaryk's publication "New Europe," among others. *Rauchsteiner*, *Der Tod des Doppeladlers*, 329.

⁷⁵ *Rauchsteiner*, *Der Tod des Doppeladlers*, 328f.

territorial aggrandizement but maintaining its territorial integrity, deflecting to the Entente became a worthy gamble to take. Austria-Hungary's war aims had never been as rigid as those of Germany, but in December 1915, Burian had added several encroachments onto Italian, Russian, and Romanian territory to the initial goal of maintaining territorial integrity.⁷⁶ In 1917, there were multiple secret German and Austrian attempts for peace. This was agreed upon by both powers, who stipulated only that the allies were to be informed that diplomatic contacts were taking place and that they should be included in any peace negotiations that might result.⁷⁷ The issue of Alsace-Lorraine for Germany and the terms of Italian demands for Austrian territory stymied these efforts.

Perhaps more than anything, the events of December 1916 demonstrate deep-seated differences between Austria-Hungary and Germany.⁷⁸ The peace attempt originated from barely-veiled Austro-Hungarian necessity, and the undercurrent of fear that a weakened Austria might itself fall under German domination is apparent. The imminent sea change of the year 1917, anticipated by this peace attempt and solidified by Karl's ascension to the Austro-Hungarian throne, brought Austria-Hungary's fear of its ally to the fore. It displayed that the monarchy, haven recently given up the highest command of its own military, could not rely on its powerful ally to act in the best interests of both powers. Perhaps for the first time, it became clear that the alliance was actively detrimental to any chances Austria-Hungary had for survival. Herwig labels the peace note of December 12th a "peace offensive,"⁷⁹ which was exactly what it was. If war, according to the famous Clausewitz dictum, is diplomacy by other means, this peace attempt, had it been successful, would have constituted a military victory without actually achieving one, using diplomacy instead of firepower.

⁷⁶ *Herwig*, *The First World War*, 303.

⁷⁷ *Kann*, *A History of the Habsburg Empire*, 475.

⁷⁸ Growing frustration is evident in Czernin's description of the peace attempt in his memoirs, which contain the following statement: "Berlin war sich natürlich auch darüber klar, dass die Zeit gegen uns laufe – obwohl Bethmann einmal im Reichstag das Gegenteil zu sagen für notwendig fand -, aber die deutschen Militärs und Politiker sahen die Situation bei den Gegnern anders als wir." It should be remembered that the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister was perhaps the strongest force in favor of the German-Austrian alliance in the monarchy. *Czernin*, *Im Weltkrieg*, 196.

⁷⁹ *Herwig*, *The First World War*, 305.

Closed and Open Diplomacy

Juxtaposing the December 12th peace note with the Sixtus Brief necessitates a discussion of methods of diplomacy. Both peace attempts came at a time in which Austria-Hungary was redefining itself both internally and regarding its place in the European balance of power, as evidenced by changes in the highest offices of the land. The conflict here, as represented by the two peace attempts, is one between closed, traditional, or “old” diplomacy and “new,” open diplomacy. The former hearkened back to 19th century power politics and was characteristic of authoritarian, dynastic regimes. The First World War in general represents a turning point between these methods in theory, though by no means in practice. Perhaps paradoxically, in light of Karl’s youth, the Sixtus peace attempt is remarkably old fashioned. The “old” regime of Burian and Franz Joseph, as demonstrated by the December peace attempts, arguably tried to use the “new” and inclusive style of international negotiations.

In lieu of a concrete definition of “old diplomacy,” Arno J. Mayer in his book *Political Origins of the New Diplomacy* defines “new diplomacy” simply as its opposite. Old diplomacy, equated with and perhaps defined as secret diplomacy, was inextricably linked to the causes of the First World War.⁸⁰ New diplomacy was the democratization of diplomacy, open and in full view of democratically-governed populaces.⁸¹ The December 12th peace attempts might be considered an attempt at new diplomacy, though they came from authoritarian, conservative regimes. Better in line with their setups was old diplomacy, which Mayer links to the 19th century world of power politics, authoritarianism, and alliance systems. Whether such considerations were indeed present in the minds of the decision-makers is questionable. Theories of “old” and “new” diplomacy in this particular context are a poor explanation of intentions, though they add to the historiographical assessment. Yet it is nevertheless interesting that the new emperor decided to work outside official channels in his peace attempt, ultimately using the more old-fashioned form of diplomacy. Perhaps, rather than working within the categories of “old” and “new,” one might instead assume that the decision-makers chose whatever method seemed most likely to succeed out of the

⁸⁰ Arno J. Mayer, *Political Origins of the New Diplomacy 1917-1918* (New Haven¹ 1959) 54-56.

⁸¹ Mayer, *Political Origins of the New Diplomacy*, 56.

available possibilities. “Old” and “new” are thereby removed from the sphere of individual actors or actions and become part of systems-level analysis.

The failure on the part of the Central Powers to secure peace in December 1916, had that been their actual intent, would be anticipated by the classical realist Hans J. Morgenthau’s views on old and new diplomacy. In stark contrast to Mayer, Morgenthau offers that open diplomacy was in fact detrimental to maintaining peace on an international level.

Morgenthau’s general theory of international relations is famously amoral, and he believes diplomacy has a limited place in the conduct of relations between sovereign nations.

Removed from auspices of openness and morality, diplomacy should fulfill the function of establishing direct connections and solving conflicts through compromise and discussion.⁸²

With this emphasis on the efficacy of directness, traditional diplomacy, even secret diplomacy, by professional diplomats and away from outside influence, had the highest chance of success.⁸³ States unable to privatize this method of negotiations must, in Morgenthau’s conception, either comply with the wishes of others or push their own agendas by means of war.⁸⁴ Yet Morgenthau’s overall point is well-taken. By making an “open” peace attempt, Austria-Hungary lost out on control over the proceedings, and on accurately addressing its national concerns and aims. It was severely misrepresented by the note sent out on December 12th. Needless to say, the Sixtus peace attempt could be characterized as direct diplomacy, and while it also met with failure, its reception by the Entente was more positive than that of the December note. Here, however, the significant changes taking place both in regards to the war and the alliance systems as well as inside the Dual Monarchy must be considered.

⁸² Hans J. *Morgenthau*, *Politics in the Twentieth Century* Vol. 3. *The Restoration of American Politics* (Chicago/London² 1962) 204.

⁸³ *Morgenthau*, *Politics in the Twentieth Century* Vol. 3, 204.

⁸⁴ *Morgenthau*, *Politics in the Twentieth Century* Vol. 3, 204.

WAR SITUATION

The events that came with the beginning of the new year suggested that the face of the war was to change and drastically so. The United States of America, previously the most powerful neutral, was poised to throw its weight behind the Entente war effort and its visionary president had far-reaching plans for the postwar world order. The Russian front was beginning its slow collapse as the tsarist regime which took Russia to war in the first place succumbed to revolutionaries. The Entente was undergoing a profound transformation and the ensuing state of flux opened an opportunity for Austria-Hungary. As the Entente reassessed its war aims and fundamental character, would it also be open to reassessing Austria-Hungary? Or, as new notions of diplomacy took hold and a new idea for the postwar world materialized, did Austria-Hungary seem even more remote and old-fashioned? Could Austria-Hungary hope to serve as a middleman between its ally Germany and the reinvigorated Entente? The first few months of 1917 were critical for the empire as it tried to define a place for itself within the shifting constellation of European powers.

Wilsonian Peace Initiative

President Wilson expressed his desire to both the Entente and the Central Powers to mediate a general peace only six days after the *Vierbund* submitted their ill-fated peace note. As early as the winter of 1915 and spring 1916, interest by the American president in brokering a European peace appear in the memoirs of the diplomat Edward House.⁸⁵ Such thoughts were hardly welcomed in Europe; the Entente had avoided all attempts at neutral mediation during the first two years of the war.⁸⁶ While no leanings had yet been established, it was suggested that should Germany refuse or obstruct an American attempt to mediate, the United States would consider joining with the Entente.⁸⁷ The two-pronged approach of Bethmann-Hollweg

⁸⁵ *Brunauer*, The Peace Proposals of December, 1916 – January, 1917, 549f.

⁸⁶ W. B. *Fest*, British War Aims and German Peace Feelers during the First World War (December 1916 – November 1918). In: *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Jun., 1972) 285-308, here 285.

⁸⁷ This is evidenced by the Entente's heavy dependence on American loans and imports. See *Stevenson*, French War Aims Against Germany, 13f, 46. However, both sides were suspicious of where Wilson's sympathies lay up until February of 1917. On the basis of repeated sinkings of ships by German torpedoes, *Brunauer* argues that Wilson knew he would eventually have to declare war on the Central Powers if peace could not be rapidly concluded. *Brunauer*, The Peace Proposals of December, 1916 – January, 1917, 546. From House's memoirs, the decision hinged directly on whether Germany attempted to block a peace conference. *Brunauer*, The Peace Proposals of December, 1916 – January, 1917, 550.

to peace negotiations that winter likely influenced American policy decisions. Although the Austro-Hungarian and German governments stood in opposition, Bethmann-Hollweg himself began openly courting a Wilsonian peace initiative.⁸⁸ The German chancellor not only publically declared his readiness to negotiate,⁸⁹ but his receptivity was backed by the unspoken threat of resuming use of the submarine, should peace negotiations fail. The threat of unrestricted submarine warfare constituted a great motivation for the American president.⁹⁰ While Wilson's tactics for bringing the belligerents to the negotiation table did not differ significantly from Bethmann-Hollweg's, he was taking exactly the course of action that Burian adamantly opposed: the avoidance of stated terms. Bethmann-Hollweg also prioritized discussions, emphasizing that the Central Powers peace terms were mild.⁹¹

President Wilson's note on the 18th of December, 1916 simply asked the belligerents to state the terms under which they would consider concluding peace. He specifically distanced himself from any association with the Central Powers peace note of December 12th, claiming the two initiatives were entirely unrelated, and that his note should be viewed on its own merits.⁹² As a general strategy, the American President tried to draw attention to the similarities between the warring powers,⁹³ another move that raised suspicion in Entente and *Vierbund* camps. Anticipating European skepticism concerning mediation, Wilson expressly stated he was not hoping to play the role of the mediator.⁹⁴ His note suggests that peace may come naturally when the belligerents state their aims, and from there reach a point of mutual understanding.⁹⁵

⁸⁸ *Brunauer*, The Peace Proposals of December, 1916 – January, 1917, 560.

⁸⁹ This apparently took the form of an interview with the publication *American*, and it was geared primarily to show similarities between German and American proposals. *Brunauer*, The Peace Proposals of December, 1916 – January, 1917, 560.

⁹⁰ *Brunauer*, The Peace Proposals of December, 1916 – January, 1917, 563.

⁹¹ These sentiments do not, however, come through in the actual note. *Brunauer* bases Bethmann-Hollweg's reluctance to publish terms on the anticipated difficulties in getting all members of the *Vierbund* to agree, as well as the risk of running afoul of public opinion. *Brunauer*, The Peace Proposals of December, 1916 – January, 1917, 556.

⁹² Note of President Wilson to the Belligerent Powers Suggesting a Statement of Peace Terms, 18. 12. 1916. In: James Brown *Scott* (Hg.), *Official Statements of War Aims and Peace Proposals: December 1916-November 1918* (Washington 1921) 13.

⁹³ Note of President Wilson to the Belligerent Powers, 13f.

⁹⁴ Note of President Wilson to the Belligerent Powers, 15.

⁹⁵ Note of President Wilson to the Belligerent Powers, 15.

That Wilson's high-minded sentiments would be interpreted as overly invasive and presumptuous by their recipients is almost to be expected. The k .u. k. *Tagesbericht des Ministeriums des Äußern* on the 31st of December contains the statement „Wilson wünscht nur Rolle welthistorischen Friedenshelden.“⁹⁶ Mentioning the involvement of the American President's ego in his attempt to instigate a peace process may result from resentment following the failure of the Central Powers' peace missive. Yet unlike the swift and vehement dismissal of the December 12th note by its recipients, Wilson's attempt remained in discussion until February, when Germany decided to reopen its unrestricted submarine war. Especially amongst the neutral nations and the Central Powers, there appeared to be ample support for Wilson's plan. On the 26th of December, the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman governments submitted separate but similar official indications of their openness to Wilson's initiative;⁹⁷ Bulgaria sent its reply in a similar vein four days later.⁹⁸

The Entente responded to President Wilson in unison on the 10th of January in a note that far exceeded the length of the Central Powers replies. Following a long exposition of the Central Powers' and especially Germany's guilt, the Entente declined Wilson's offer with the words:

United in the pursuits of this supreme object the Allies are determined, individually and collectively, to act with all their power and to consent to all sacrifices to bring to a victorious close a conflict upon which they are convinced not only their own safety and prosperity depends but also the future of civilization itself.⁹⁹

Specifically, the Entente took umbrage at Wilson's insinuation that the ultimate goals and mindsets of the warring parties were similar enough that peace could easily be reached.¹⁰⁰

The Entente response is more than a diplomatic missive denoting action taken by the government; it is also a show of war rhetoric. In a sense, even in declining the American

⁹⁶ Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äußern, 31. 12. 1916. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äußern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April /Karton 57.

⁹⁷ German Reply to President Wilson, 26. 12. 1916; Austro-Hungarian Reply to President Wilson's Peace Note, 26. 12. 1916; Turkish Reply to President Wilson, 26. 12. 1916. In: James Brown Scott (Hg.), Official Statements of War Aims and Peace Proposals: December 1916-November 1918 (Washington 1921) 22-24.

⁹⁸ Bulgarian Reply to President Wilson, 30. 12. 1916. In: James Brown Scott (Hg.), Official Statements of War Aims and Peace Proposals: December 1916-November 1918 (Washington 1921) 29f.

⁹⁹ Entente Reply to President Wilson, 10. 1. 1917. In: James Brown Scott (Hg.), Official Statements of War Aims and Peace Proposals: December 1916-November 1918 (Washington 1921) 35-38, here 37f.

¹⁰⁰ Entente Reply to President Wilson, 36.

offer, the Entente nations had complied with Wilson's wish for clarity on the aims of the warring parties – peace terms, if they existed at all, took a back seat to the desire to achieve decisive military victory.

This damning response to a neutral power from the Entente was not taken by the Central Powers without protest. Both Germany and Austria-Hungary responded to Entente allegations on January 12th with venom equal to the charges leveled at them. Germany's note detailed the allegedly numerous violations of international law committed by members of the Entente,¹⁰¹ whereas Austria-Hungary chose to focus on the issue of small states and self-determination.¹⁰² Here the Austro-Hungarians identify a fundamental hypocrisy – members of the Entente painted Austria-Hungary as repressive, whilst committing even more grievous oppression against minorities under their own jurisdiction.¹⁰³ The hostile Entente response was almost welcomed by the Central Powers as proof of their guilt in needlessly prolonging the war.¹⁰⁴

In an address to the Senate of the United States on January 22, 1917, President Wilson differentiated between the Central Power's stated readiness to enter peace discussions and the Entente's clearer statements of war aims.¹⁰⁵ But rather than direct his speech at the behavior of the belligerents, Wilson instead chose to explore the basis and form of future peace. The postwar world order and the foundation for peace would necessarily involve the United States to a greater degree than before – a gentle case for abandoning American neutrality, not to become involved in the war, but to play a role in the subsequent peace. In this speech to the Senate, Wilson began to use the rhetoric of a "peace without victory" for the first time.¹⁰⁶ This, while in line with the new Austro-Hungarian Kaiser's stated aim, ran counter to those

¹⁰¹ German Comment upon Entente Reply to President Wilson, 12. 1. 1917. In: James Brown Scott (Hg.), *Official Statements of War Aims and Peace Proposals: December 1916-November 1918* (Washington 1921) 40-42.

¹⁰² Austro-Hungarian Comment upon Entente Reply to President Wilson, 12. 1. 1917. In: James Brown Scott (Hg.), *Official Statements of War Aims and Peace Proposals: December 1916-November 1918* (Washington 1921) 42-44.

¹⁰³ The note mentions among others the plights of the Irish and Finnish peoples. Austro-Hungarian Comment upon Entente Reply to President Wilson, 44.

¹⁰⁴ Proclamation by Kaiser Wilhelm II to the German People, 13. 1. 1917. In: James Brown Scott (Hg.), *Official Statements of War Aims and Peace Proposals: December 1916-November 1918* (Washington 1921) 45.

¹⁰⁵ Address of President Wilson to the Senate, 22. 1. 1917. In: James Brown Scott (Hg.), *Official Statements of War Aims and Peace Proposals: December 1916-November 1918* (Washington 1921) 49-55.

¹⁰⁶ Address of President Wilson to the Senate, 51f.

of France and Germany. Yet he appears to have built this statement from pre-existing pacifistic sentiments; peace, in any case, was the goal, not the annihilation of the opponents. Wilson's general trajectory discounts the role discussion and negotiation can play in bringing about an end to the war, arguing instead that the basis for peace will be built from a paradigm shift.¹⁰⁷ Equality among nations, great and small, becomes Wilson's stated ideal. This equality and the foundation for international peace that it represents would, moreover, be the result of democratic governance.¹⁰⁸ Perhaps in anticipation of Germany's controversial intentions to use unrestricted submarine warfare, Wilson emphasized the importance of free access to the sea in creating a world peace.¹⁰⁹ Despite its emphasis on future peace, Wilson's speech to the Senate in effect frames the conditions upon which the United States may enter the war.

Wilson came under fire from both the Entente and the Central Powers, each believing his true neutrality to be in question. Despite Bethmann-Hollweg's displayed penchant for vagueness, the "peace without victory" formulation of the Wilsonian peace note was to the exacting Germans a dead letter. In order to negotiate, they suddenly wanted concrete terms and clear-set boundaries.¹¹⁰ This change of tactics reflects their trepidation with mediation from a neutral country, as in their December peace note, the Central Powers chose to keep their aims undisclosed. "Theoretical" negotiations were, apparently, anathema to German sensibilities.¹¹¹ The timing of the American attempt to open negotiations may well have doomed it, along with Bethmann-Hollweg's endorsement. The neutrality of the President in the eyes of Entente nations was put into question, perhaps intentionally on the part of Germany. The German chancellor, in a note to Hindenburg on the 27th of November, indicated that it would be beneficial for Germany and the Central Powers if the Entente rejected the American proposals instead of those issuing from the Central Powers, as this would turn neutral and American sympathies against England and France.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ Address of President Wilson to the Senate, 51f.

¹⁰⁸ Address of President Wilson to the Senate, 52.

¹⁰⁹ Address of President Wilson to the Senate, 53.

¹¹⁰ *Brunauer*, The Peace Proposals of December, 1916 – January, 1917, 568.

¹¹¹ It will be later argued that the Sixtus peace attempts could also be considered theoretical, as the concessions laid out in the Sixtus Brief involved territories outside of Austro-Hungarian jurisdiction.

¹¹² „Zweifelloso aber ist unsere Situation eine bessere, wenn die Ablehnung aller Verhandlungen durch die Entente einen Appell Wilsons, als wenn sie ein Angebot von uns trifft. Deshalb wird die Unpopularität, der ein

Both Betty Miller Unterberger and Sterling Kernek in their scholarly accounts of the proceedings opine that Wilson's actions were motivated by his need for international prestige. Regardless of motives, the American president did have some diplomatic advantages. The United States was able to maintain an outsider perspective in the First World War well into the conflict, as there were no American interests or possessions at stake. However, the United States was sorely tempted by the chance to win prestige and develop as an indisputable world power should it succeed in skillful resolution of the situation.¹¹³ As a neutral actor, this had proven impossible, and as the war progressed, so did American bias. Not only was the United States already supporting French and British war efforts in the form of loans,¹¹⁴ but with the loss of absolutist Russia from the Entente, it could morally take part in what had become a fight against authoritarian regimes.¹¹⁵ Prestige was doubtless a motivation, and the spring of 1917 presented the optimal opportunity for an assertion of American might as Wilson wanted to present it.

Austria-Hungary's "State of the Union" Going Into 1917

Had Austria-Hungary the ability to act entirely on its own with no fear of repercussions, one might assume it would have accepted Wilson's offer to mediate a peace. Such a decision would be made with purely pragmatic and practical considerations, as the new Kaiser himself showed a desire to take a leading role in bringing about peace. Significant change was on the horizon; what these changes actually meant for the monarchy and for the wider war situation remained unclear. Taking stock at the beginning of 1917 presents an empire not without past success or hope for the future, but also in an exceedingly precarious situation. Austria-Hungary's victories in the Balkans satisfied its war aims, but did not deliver it from outside

Wilson'scher Appell in weiten Kreisen bei uns begegnen wird, für unsere Entschlüsse nicht maßgebend sein dürfen. Auf der anderen Seite werden wir bei der Unsicherheit, die über den Entschlüssen Wilsons bis zum letzten Augenblick schweben wird, und bei der mit dem Fortschritt des Winters abnehmenden etwaigen Geneigtheit unserer Feinde, auf Friedensverhandlungen einzugehen, den psychologischen Moment für ein eigenes Friedensangebot über der Hoffnung auf einen Appell Wilsons nicht ungenützt vorübergehen lassen dürfen.“ 4058/908756-9 No 396 Bethmann-Hollweg à Hindenburg, 27. 11. 1916. In: André Scherer, Jacques Grunewald, *L'Allemagne et les Problèmes de la Paix. Pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale*, Bd. 1. (Paris 1962) 580f, here 580f.

¹¹³ Betty Miller Unterberger, *The United States and National Self-Determination. A Wilsonian Perspective*. In: *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 4, *Intricacies of U.S. Foreign Policy* (Fall, 1996) 926-941, here 929.

¹¹⁴ In 1916, for instance, 30% of French imports came from the United States, along with loans of 3.4 billion francs to pay for them. Stevenson, *French War Aims Against Germany*, 13.

¹¹⁵ The increasing moral focus also helped win American sympathies at a time when American Irish Catholics were little inclined to support Britain after the Easter Rising in April 1916.

threats or from its own internal weaknesses. Its new emperor, a product of a different generation and with a different world view than his predecessor, was at the same time a breath of fresh air and an enormous risk. The k. u. k. Armee had successfully held off utter defeat on the Russian and Italian fronts, but at great cost to itself, and it could hardly hope to sustain further such efforts. In a tumultuous time even within the general context of the war, Austria-Hungary still had reason to hope,¹¹⁶ yet had never been more vulnerable.

Kaiser Karl

Karl presided over the downfall of his house and of his empire, all in the context of a disastrous war. By any measure, his rule was an abject failure. Yet few would dispute that this was largely caused by factors beyond his control – at the time of the young emperor’s ascension, Austria-Hungary was probably beyond help.¹¹⁷ A recent dissertation by Christopher Brennan entitled “Reforming Austria-Hungary: Beyond his control or beyond his capacity? The domestic policies of Emperor Karl I November 1916 – May 1917” addresses the lack of serious scholarly analysis of Karl’s reign and political ability. The ultimate outcome of the war in many ways defined not only Karl’s political acumen, but is also used, perhaps unfairly, to assess his character. Brennan’s thesis goes a long way to provide a chronological and relatively objective analysis of Karl’s preparation for the throne and his actions upon taking it. The insurmountability of the task set before Karl can hardly be overemphasized, and by all accounts including the relatively sympathetic and holistic one of Brennan, he was poorly prepared to take it on.

Karl not only belonged to a different generation with different priorities than the old Kaiser,¹¹⁸ but his youth and inexperience led him to assume a far greater deal of involvement

¹¹⁶ “Reason to hope” in this context refers to the probability that Austro-Hungarians at the beginning of 1917 were not completely resigned to defeat. It is evident to the modern observer that it would have been exceedingly difficult to save Austria-Hungary by this point, though historians differ as their assessments of the empire’s prospects.

¹¹⁷ Austro-Hungarian “disintegration” and “dismemberment” will be discussed later in this thesis. To qualify the above statement, it seems safe to say that at the very least, Austria-Hungary was powerless to wrest victory out of the world war at the end of 1916, and such a victory was the empire’s only chance for survival. Simply put, Karl was unable to bring about a victory with his personal actions, and was thereby unable to avert the downfall of the empire.

¹¹⁸ Kann emphasizes the enormous age difference between the two Kaisers as an important factor in their vision of Austria-Hungary’s role in Europe. While both, perhaps paradoxically for Franz Joseph, were loyal to Germany, Karl was, in Kann’s conception, more committed to Austro-Hungarian independence. Kann associates Franz Joseph’s upbringing in the tradition of post-Napoleonic Europe and the German Confederation with a more resigned and stoic attitude regarding the alliance. *Kann, History of the Habsburg Empire*, 474.

in running his empire and in waging war. Whether or not his fresh perspective was good is irrelevant and subjective; the change in command that he represented came at an inopportune time. The young Kaiser made his intention to end the war evident to all from the outset. On the 29th of January, 1917 after meeting Karl in Baden, Alexander Freiherr von Musulin wrote “[e]r wünschte nicht als den Frieden. Keine Vorteile für sein Haus und keinen Machtzuwachs für sein Reich. Nur den Frieden, und zwar so bald, als er irgendwie ehrhaft möglich sei.”¹¹⁹ Karl’s appraisal by historians today ranges from mildly sympathetic to hostile, but none see his ascension to the throne as beneficial for Austria-Hungary. His youthful energy and intent to resolve the war for his empire as soon as possible put him in conflict with the hitherto established imperial war machine. Rauchensteiner, for one, assesses the young man harshly, claiming Karl tried to force his personal perception on every issue, and interpreting this action as a means the emperor used to reinforce his authority.¹²⁰ Seen in this light, Karl’s affinity for secret negotiations becomes more understandable. Rauchensteiner as well as Herwig further criticize Karl’s “hands-on” approach to his position, which in their estimation was detrimental to the k. u. k. Armee.¹²¹¹²² Rauchensteiner frames Karl’s dilemma as having to fight against the war and for the peace.¹²³ To this, one might add that the Kaiser fought against the war while at the same time holding up alliance and popular obligations to fight the war. In this, as well as his other objectives, Karl met with failure.¹²⁴ More charitable among academic assessments of the young Kaiser, John Boyer describes Karl as characterized by a “gentle incompetence.”¹²⁵ Gary Shanafelt in his book *The Secret Enemy: Austria-Hungary and the German Alliance, 1914-1918* assesses the Kaiser as an intelligent man, though idealistic and compulsive, and

¹¹⁹ Wilhelm Möller, Chronik des Weltkrieges 1917. In: AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Sonderbestände: Nachlässe, Nachlass Wilhelm Möller (1914 – 1918) 307-8.

¹²⁰ Rauchensteiner, *Der Tod des Doppeladlers*, 397.

¹²¹ Rauchensteiner, *Der Tod des Doppeladlers*, 397.

¹²² Herwig, *The First World War*, 243. Herwig is particularly critical of Karl’s decisions to exercise more control over the k. u. k. military. These included bans on corporal punishment of soldiers, executions of civilians and military personnel in war zones, the use of gas without an imperial sanction, and dueling in the army. Strategic strikes on military targets were stopped if they put civilians in danger. While these reforms may have seemed wise and humanitarian, they served, in Herwig’s words, to break down military discipline.

¹²³ Rauchensteiner, *Der Tod des Doppeladlers*, 399.

¹²⁴ Rauchensteiner maintains that Karl failed not only in securing peace or military victory, but also in his other aims. Karl failed to reform and consolidate his crown lands, moreover he failed in removing the shadow of German dominance. Rauchensteiner, *Der Tod des Doppeladlers*, 399.

¹²⁵ John W. Boyer, *Culture and Political Crisis in Vienna. Christian Socialism in Power, 1897 – 1918* (Chicago 1995) 406.

ultimately lacking the strength necessary to sustain and solidify his undertakings;¹²⁶ this perspective also emerges from Brennan's analysis of Karl's record in office.

Eyewitnesses concur that Karl was poorly prepared to become Emperor of Austria-Hungary in November 1916. Foreign Minister Ottokar Czernin reportedly saw his role in relation to the Kaiser as that of "a tutor who must instruct a mediocre pupil."¹²⁷ General Carl Ritter von Tersztyánsky, who actually met the Kaiser, was rather damning: "you hope to meet a thirty-year-old there, but you find a man with the appearance of at twenty-year old youth, who thinks, speaks, and acts like a ten-year-old boy."¹²⁸ Karl's maturity or lack thereof is a constant issue, one perhaps thrown into greater relief in light of the dire international situation and the exceptional age and venerability of his predecessor. First-hand observers noted that the Kaiser was too agreeable, often tending to adopt the opinion of whomever he last spoke to.¹²⁹ There was no question on Karl's religiosity - this was one clear motivation in his drive for peace – and he had had no preparation or experience in politics prior to taking office.¹³⁰ Due to his experience on the front, it could hardly be said that he had been entirely sheltered from the realities of the imperial situation or the war itself. Admittedly, he had little training or practical experience to back up his suitability for the throne.¹³¹ This "outsider" quality, combined with his religiosity, are often interpreted to the effect that his understanding of real-world affairs was fragile. Karl was not, as indicated by Czernin during the Sixtus Affair of Spring 1918, mentally deficient or unstable.¹³² He was not wholly without talent, and may have been a successful emperor under more advantageous circumstances. In Professor Heinrich Lammasch's words, "Charles never had a fair chance; but his feet were on the right path and his heart was in the right place."¹³³ Conversely, one might be led to conclude that Karl's virtues and abilities were immaterial; a man of more talent could hardly have done better when faced with such a situation.

¹²⁶ Gary Shanafelt, *The Secret Enemy. Austria-Hungary and the German Alliance 1914-1918*, (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1985) 103.

¹²⁷ Quoted from Arthur J. May, *The Passing of the Hapsburg Monarchy 1914-1918 Vol. 1&2* (Philadelphia 1966) 462.

¹²⁸ Quoted from *Herwig*, *The First World War*, 243.

¹²⁹ May, *The Passing of the Hapsburg Monarchy*, 438.

¹³⁰ Brennan, *Reforming Austria-Hungary*, 16.

¹³¹ Brennan, *Reforming Austria-Hungary*, 32. One of Karl's major influences had been Franz Ferdinand.

¹³² Ernst Feigl (Hg.), *Kaiser Karl. Persönliche Aufzeichnungen, Zeugnisse und Dokumente*, (Wien 1984) 211.

¹³³ Quoted from May, *The Passing of the Hapsburg Monarchy*, 438.

Fronts

Though 1916 had been a difficult year for the Central Powers, it was not entirely negative for Austria-Hungary. It had not succumbed to Italian invasion, the Brusilov Offensive had been rolled back, albeit with heavy German assistance, and Romania had been soundly defeated. Serbia, the original enemy, was defeated and occupied by the k. u. k. Armee in 1915. Romania, though perhaps unimportant in a war of great world powers, played on Austrian-Hungarian fears of territorial integrity. Like Italy, it had entered the war relatively late – August of 1916 – and with guarantees of territory from Britain and France.¹³⁴ By December, however, German and Austro-Hungarian troops overwhelmed Romanian forces. The defeats of Romania and Serbia closed down two fronts, thereby changing the nature of Austro-Hungarian further participation in the war. At this point, Austria-Hungary was only engaged in maintaining its territory and resisting invasion, having no further agenda to fulfill. In 1916, Austrian diplomats and politicians wondered why Germany was not yet at war with Italy.¹³⁵ Shortly after the outbreak of Austro-Italian hostilities, German Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg had given a speech in the Reichstag extolling the strength of the *Vierbund* and condemning Italian perfidy.¹³⁶ He also indicated that while Italian troops would nominally fight against Austro-Hungarian troops, there would necessarily be German soldiers engaged as the armed forces of the two Central Powers had some integration by this point.¹³⁷ For all its muscular language and apparently enthusiastic reception, Bethmann-Hollweg's speech contained no declaration of war. War on this front finally came a year later at the end of August 1916 when Italy declared war on Germany. This might be justified by the fact that Italy had little direct effect on Germany. It did, however, affect the Austro-

¹³⁴ Herwig, *The First World War*, 217.

¹³⁵ Germany's reluctance or refusal to declare war was apparently viewed as a reason to try to incite Italy to declare war on Germany. The Swiss delegation describes the relationship between Germany and Italy as "absolut unnormale." 26. k. u. k. österr. ungar. Gesandtschaft in der Schweiz. No. 5. Bern 14. Jan. 1916 Geheim Die noch immer ausstehende Kriegserklärung zwischen Italien und Deutschland. Schwebende Untersuchung wegen eines von deutscher Seite gegen Italien vorbereitet gewesenen Dynamitanschlags An Baron Burian, 19. 1. 1916. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv I, Geheimeakten, Krieg 1914-1918/ Liasse XLVII/5 b-g/ Karton 511.

¹³⁶ „Jetzt hat die italienische Regierung selbst ihren Treubruch mit blutigen Lettern unvergänglich in das Buch der Weltgeschichte eingeschrieben.“ Berlin, den 28. Mai, Erklärung des Reichskanzlers.

Reichstagsverhandlungen. 11. Sitzung vom Freitag 28. Mai 1915, 3 Uhr. Reichskanzler Bethmann-Hollweg. In: Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung (Zweite Ausgabe) Jg. 54, Nr. 147 (29. 5. 1915). AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv I, Geheimeakten, Krieg 1914-1918/ Liasse XLVII/5 b-g/ Karton 511.

¹³⁷ Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung, Sonnabend den 29. Mai 1915.

German alliance, and with that, the general war situation. Austria-Hungary's involvement on this front had an impact on the distribution of troops on the Eastern Front,¹³⁸ and is by this token directly related to the question of the k. u. k. Armee's dependence on reinforcement from the German military. However, Italy did not seem to be in a position to defeat Austria-Hungary; its troops lacked innovative or even effective leadership in the person of Cadorna, who could prove unsuccessful even with a significant numerical advantage.¹³⁹ At the time of the Sixtus peace attempts in early 1917, Italy was becoming Austria-Hungary's main front.

Austria-Hungary's original enemy, Serbia, had been subdued and was occupied by k. u. k. troops by the start of 1917. Its defeat was deemed necessary by the Germans to ensure uninterrupted supply lines to the faltering Ottoman Empire with the Berlin-Istanbul railway and considerable effort on the part of the Central Powers had been poured into Serbia. Austro-Hungarian, German, and Bulgarian troops took part in rolling back the Serbian Army, which they achieved at the end of 1915. Though they succeeded in nearly destroying the Serbian Army, their victory was tempered by the opening of an Entente front in Macedonia, technically a neutral country. From Macedonia, French, Serbian, and Italian troops managed to keep the Central Powers engaged, at the very least in small skirmishes, up until 1918.

All things considered, Austria-Hungary's military situation was not at a low point at the time Karl ascended to the throne. Although the Brusilov Offensive had devastated Austro-Hungarian morale and independence, the empire was in a relatively secure position. The Russian threat had diminished and the front lines pushed back, and its new ally Romania had collapsed, leaving considerable material resources available for exploitation by the Central Powers. Austria had successfully resisted Italian invasion and did not expect further attacks on that front in the winter of 1916/1917. There had been no significant action in Serbia since its defeat in the previous year. Brennan, for one, opines that these factors constituted relatively favorable standings for Austria-Hungary going into 1917.¹⁴⁰ However, the

¹³⁸ The best illustration of this is, again, the Brusilov offensive. Despite dire need for troops to hold back the Russian onslaught, Conrad was so taken with defeating the Italian enemy that he actually transferred machinery and manpower away from the Eastern front and onto the Italian one.

¹³⁹ Herwig cites the example of the first of the twelve Isonzo battles, in which Italy had 18 divisions against 8 Austro-Hungarian ones and lost due to Cadorna's disregard for the terrain on which he chose to launch his offensive. *Herwig, The First World War*, 153.

¹⁴⁰ *Brennan, Reforming Austria-Hungary*, 49.

prevailing sentiment was that the empire would not survive another year of war. The strain was beginning to show in suffering and unrest on the home front, which for the multinational empire constituted a battlefield as real and dangerous as any literal one.

Domestic Situation

The Entente reply to Wilson's note had included its determination to advance the cause of national self-determination amongst the peoples of Austria-Hungary.¹⁴¹ By 1917, Habsburg concerns for the viability of the multinational empire were acute, and there was considerable worry over the loyalty of the Czechs in particular. Whether the Bohemian problem was fixable, and whether Karl expended enough effort in trying to do so, goes well beyond the confines of this thesis. Certainly the answer to these questions varies in accordance with perspective; Czech nationalist movements outside of Austria-Hungary attracted more attention and action to their cause than the more hesitant and ambivalent movements within the empire. Brennan emphasizes in his dissertation that while Czech nationalist movements inside the Austro-Hungarian Empire took time to materialize into a truly destructive force, Karl did not take advantage of this and missed opportunities to potentially fix the problem.¹⁴²

The Dual Alliance held together for the most part under the strain of the war, although tensions between the two halves of the monarchy markedly increased. The German alliance politically strengthened the Austrian half of the empire,¹⁴³ though they would lose their advantage with the May 1917 reconvening of Parliament,¹⁴⁴ in which Slavic interests made a strong showing.¹⁴⁵ Prior to this parliamentary forum, Slavic elements had little, if any voice in k. u. k. politics.¹⁴⁶ Generally speaking, the Austrian and Magyar majority populations remained loyal to the idea of the Austro-Hungarian Empire up until the last few weeks of the

¹⁴¹ Entente Reply to President Wilson, 10. 1. 1916. In: James Brown Scott (Hg.), *Official Statements of War Aims and Peace Proposals: December 1916-November 1918* (Washington 1921) 35-38, here 37.

¹⁴² Brennan, *Reforming Austria-Hungary*, 14f.

¹⁴³ Kann, *A History of the Habsburg Empire*, 498.

¹⁴⁴ Parliament had been kept adjourned by the Austrian Prime Minister Karl Graf Stürgkh since the beginning of the war. His assassination on October 21st, 1916 represented the first open rebellion against wartime absolutism in Austria-Hungary and perhaps even in the wider scheme of the First World War.

¹⁴⁵ For a more thorough discussion on the nationality question as it relates to Czech and South Slav interests at this point in the war, see Mark Cornwall, *The Undermining of Austria-Hungary. The Battle for Hearts and Minds* (New York 2000).

¹⁴⁶ Mark Cornwall, *Disintegration and Defeat. The Austro-Hungarian Revolution*. In: Mark Cornwall (Hg.), *The Last Years of Austria-Hungary: A Multi-National Experiment in Early Twentieth Century Europe* (Exeter² 2002) 167-196, here 181.

war. For the most part, they met with no great resistance from the Slavs for the first few years of the conflict. However, the Magyar-Austrian relationship was not without its own troubles. As Transleithania was the predominantly agricultural part of the empire, problems centered around distribution of food. Although k. u. k. troops were well supplied, the Hungarians eventually stopped sending food to the Cisleithania.¹⁴⁷ Eventually, Hungary succumbed to a food crisis as well, but conditions were markedly better for far longer than in Austria. The monarchy was a self-contained economic unit in theory, but its component parts tried to decrease their dependency on the whole.¹⁴⁸ Although the Hungarian Prime Minister Istvan Tisza had for the most part managed to keep control of the Hungarian government for the first several years of the war, by 1917, the situation had begun to deteriorate, and by May of that year, he was forced from office. Tisza's biggest trouble had been the nationality problem, which was as much a concern of Hungary's as it was of Austria, and he had shown just as little flexibility in the direction of making concessions.¹⁴⁹

Dissatisfaction at the material cost of the war did not restrict itself to food riots and other forms of popular protest. The Meinlgruppe, a group of Austrian businessmen led by Julius Meinl II whose economic enterprises were endangered by shortages and economic turmoil, began pushing for peace as early as autumn 1916.¹⁵⁰ In a memorandum from September of 1916, Meinl questioned the ability of the monarchy to hold out for another year of war based on its food production, and predicted its political and economic ruin, should it fail to conclude peace before Christmas of that year.¹⁵¹ At the very least, the actions and standpoints taken by the Meinlgruppe are a vote of no confidence in the empire by its industrial leaders, whose analysis of Habsburg prospects were tinged with practical concerns. In a speech to the Österreichische Politische Gesellschaft¹⁵² on the December 12th Central

¹⁴⁷ Kann, *A History of the Habsburg Empire*, 488.

¹⁴⁸ In Shanafelt's words, "[e]conomic unity may have been dictated by the Monarchy's geography, but it was resisted by its political system." *Shanafelt, The Secret Enemy*, 3.

¹⁴⁹ Kann, *A History of the Habsburg Empire*, 495.

¹⁵⁰ For original documents and information on the Meinlgruppe, see Heinrich *Benedikt*, *Die Friedensaktionen der Meinlgruppe 1917/18. Die Bemühungen um einen Verständigungsfrieden nach Dokumenten, Aktenstücken u. Briefen* (Graz/Köln 1962). The documents also offer a contemporary critical perspective on k. u. k. politics.

¹⁵¹ Julius *Meinl*, *Meinls Denkschrift vom September 1916*. In: Heinrich *Benedikt*, *Die Friedensaktionen der Meinlgruppe 1917/18. Die Bemühungen um einen Verständigungsfrieden nach Dokumenten, Aktenstücken u. Briefen* (Graz/Köln 1962) 14-20, here 14f.

¹⁵² This society, in existence from 1916 to 1918, was founded by Julius Meinl II and fellow industrialist Max Friedmann as a civilian forum.

Powers peace attempt, Meinl emphasized the need of the Central Powers to court Wilson, who himself was more interested in creating a sustainable peace than in entering the war,¹⁵³ though he felt that Austria-Hungary was ultimately better suited to play the role of mediator than the American president.¹⁵⁴ The Meinlgruppe eventually moved its dialogues up to the political level, culminating in recommendations and enumerated wishes for a peace attempt in speeches by Julius Meinl II and Professor Dr. Heinrich Lammasch in January of 1917. Here, echoing Wilson, the businessmen pushed for peace without victory and for the creation of an international peacekeeping league.¹⁵⁵ In keeping with their commercial concerns, relations with neutral nations were of high interest¹⁵⁶ and one can imagine that members of the Meinl were particularly worried by Germany's threat to resume unrestricted submarine warfare. It is unclear to what extent this pressure was felt directly by Karl – Meinl made sure to emphasize the role of industrialists in the war effort¹⁵⁷ – but Karl's own efforts in the first half of 1917 appear to address similar concerns.

Resumption of Unrestricted Submarine Warfare by Germany

The German decision to restart its unrestricted submarine warfare campaign was months in the making. Intended to rapidly weaken Great Britain, the U-Boot Krieg aimed as well to nullify any advantage the Entente stood to gain should the United States decide to enter the war, as it would prevent American troops from landing on European soil. At the very least, unrestricted submarine warfare would stop any shipments of arms to the island nation. The decision to resume unrestricted submarine warfare was probably one of the riskiest taken in the course of the war, and was made with a strong sense of fatalism. Holger Herwig, in his encyclopedic *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary 1914-1918*, puzzles as to why the Central Powers chose this route. As indicated by correspondence between military

¹⁵³ Julius Meinl, Meinls Rede in der Politischen Gesellschaft nach dem Friedensangebot vom 12. Dezember 1916. In: Heinrich Benedikt, *Die Friedensaktionen der Meinlgruppe 1917/18. Die Bemühungen um einen Verständigungsfrieden nach Dokumenten, Aktenstücken u. Briefen* (Graz/Köln 1962) 20-25, here 20f.

¹⁵⁴ Meinl, Meinls Rede in der Politischen Gesellschaft, 25.

¹⁵⁵ Julius Meinl, 'Unsere Friedensziele'. Referat, gehalten von Meinl am 29. Jänner 1917 in der Österreichischen Politischen Gesellschaft. In: Heinrich Benedikt, *Die Friedensaktionen der Meinlgruppe 1917/18. Die Bemühungen um einen Verständigungsfrieden nach Dokumenten, Aktenstücken u. Briefen* (Graz/Köln 1962) 62-65, here 62f.

¹⁵⁶ Meinl argues that the neutrals, in particular the United States could help solve territorial disputes between the belligerents. Meinl, 'Unsere Friedensziele', 63.

¹⁵⁷ Meinl, 'Unsere Friedensziele', 63.

and political leaders during the last few months of 1916,¹⁵⁸ the German military high command pushed hard for the U-Boot Krieg. This was an all-or-nothing gamble from the point of view of the politicians involved. Going beyond whether or not the submarines had the chance of achieving their stated aims, the decision would certainly make Germany tremendously unpopular. Herwig attributes the risky decision on the part of Bethmann-Hollweg to the belief that it might lift popular opinion and morale during the difficult winter of 1916/1917, as well as a reflection of the immense power and popularity of the German military leaders, Hindenburg in particular.¹⁵⁹ Karl's agreement to participate, Herwig postulates, was made with some insincerity, as Karl was at this time actively planning his secret attempt to end the war.¹⁶⁰ Herwig also notes that Austria-Hungary could hardly refuse to take part in the initiative, as it was by now so heavily dependent on Germany.¹⁶¹

In a stalemated war, the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare was intended to be a game changer and it was, though not in the way Germany had originally planned. It did not succeed in striking a death blow to Britain¹⁶²; the blow instead hit Germany's reputation and moral standing. The stalemate was therefore broken in the ability to wage a "moral" war against a nefarious enemy, a mindset that reinvigorated the Entente. The resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare struck a terrible blow against the Central Powers in the eyes of neutral nations worldwide.¹⁶³ Not only humanitarian concerns motivated their anger –

¹⁵⁸ Of note are 4058/908976 N° 415 Note de Hindenburg, 8. 12. 1916. In: André Scherer, Jacques Grunewald, *L'Allemagne et les Problèmes de la Paix. Pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale*, Bd. 1. (Paris 1962) 609; 4058/908978-81 N° 417 Note de Bethmann-Hollweg, 9. 12. 1916. In: André Scherer, Jacques Grunewald, *L'Allemagne et les Problèmes de la Paix. Pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale*, Bd. 1. (Paris 1962) 610f; 3107/627469-78 No 437 Holzendorff à Bethmann-Hollweg, 24.12. 1916. In: André Scherer, Jacques Grunewald, *L'Allemagne et les Problèmes de la Paix. Pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale*, Bd. 1. (Paris 1962) 633-637.

¹⁵⁹ Herwig, *The First World War*, 316.

¹⁶⁰ Herwig, *The First World War*, 317.

¹⁶¹ Herwig, *The First World War*, 317.

¹⁶² According to Herwig, the Germans neglected to take into account the speed at which the British could offset losses in shipping by producing their own grain and raw materials, the grain reserves they already possessed, and their institution of convoy. To this, he adds that the Germans had far too few U-boats to successfully implement their own policy. Herwig, *The First World War*, 318f.

¹⁶³ The daily report of the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Ministry stated that in Spain, public opinion was liable to turn against the Central Powers if unrestricted submarine warfare was resumed. Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern, 27. 1. 1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April /Karton 57. The daily report on the day Germany's decision became public also indicated serious concerns that this step would anger neutral nations. Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern, 4. 2. 1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April /Karton 57.

neutral shipping would be put at risk by roving German U-Boats.¹⁶⁴ While the United States was the only nation to take up arms against the Central Powers as a direct result of this controversial policy, most neutrals registered dissatisfaction with the German initiative. Losing neutral sympathies was evidently less of a concern for Germany than it was for Austria-Hungary, which had hoped to remain in the good graces of uninvolved nations for as long as possible.¹⁶⁵

Austro-Hungarian Opinions

Germany's partners in the *Vierbund* were not enthusiastic about the prospect of unrestricted submarine warfare. Karl privately expressed his concerns to his ministers over the implications of an American entrance on the side of the Entente, indicating that this development would make defeat inevitable.¹⁶⁶ Nevertheless, they kept up a public façade of unity with their ally, and tried to foster solidarity among the Central Powers. When the Ottoman Empire showed reluctance to join Austria-Hungary in breaking off diplomatic relations with the United States should it declare war on Germany in early April 1917, the k. u. k. diplomat in Istanbul urged the Turks to follow the example of their allies "um so der uns verbündende Solidarität einen deutlichen Ausdruck zu geben."¹⁶⁷ When war was declared, the Turkish foreign minister promised he would do so in the interests of solidarity, should Germany expressly call for such action from its allies.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁴ Austro-Hungarian efforts to offset the neutral anger on the subject of the U-Boot Krieg is indicated by their frantic diplomatic missions to neutral countries, Spain and Scandinavia in particular. This was necessary as the submarines exacted some collateral damage. Norway indicated at the beginning of March that the German-English sea war disrupted coal and food shipments. Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern, 1. 3. 1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April /Karton 57.

¹⁶⁵ A letter from Hungarian Prime Minister Istvan Tisza to the newly-appointed Czernin on the 26th of December 1916 indicates a certain reliance on the sympathies of neutral nations. Not only does Tisza claim that the European neutrals feel themselves threatened more from England than from the Vierbund, but that the war aims of the Central Powers are in the interests of the whole neutral world. Graf Ottakar Czernin, Im Weltkrieg (Berlin 1918) 188f.

¹⁶⁶ Polzer-Hoditz, Kaiser Karl, 317.

¹⁶⁷ Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern, 6. 4. 1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien,

Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April /Karton 57. This is particularly interesting in light of German reluctance to fight against Italy in 1915.

¹⁶⁸ „In einer Besprechung der türkischen Minister ist beschlossen worden dass, nachdem Österreich-Ungarn mittlerweile die Beziehungen zu Amerika abgebrochen habe, die Türkei aus dem Grunde der Solidarität das Gleiche thun würde, falls dies Deutschland ausdrücklich verlange.“ Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern, 13. 4. 1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April /Karton 57.

Austro-Hungarian troops would in all likelihood never come in contact with the Americans. The k. u. k. Armee was not engaged on the Western Front, where American soldiers would support French and British efforts, nor would Austro-Hungarian submarines, which operated in the Mediterranean Sea, have much of a chance of meeting an American ship.¹⁶⁹ This does not appear to have softened the blow of the Entente gaining a powerful ally at this crucial time. Karl's Chief of Cabinet Arthur Graf Polzer-Hoditz made it clear in his recollections of the war that hopes for a *Vierbund* victory were lost,¹⁷⁰ the reason for this being that Austria-Hungary was already at the end of its ability to continue fighting. For his part, Conrad von Hötzendorff was remarkably dismissive of the connection between the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare on the part of Germany and the American decision to thereby enter the war.¹⁷¹ Perhaps indicative of his oft-stated loyalty to the German Empire, he claims that the United States had become so deeply invested in the Entente through its loans that it needed an Entente victory, and presumably would have entered the war regardless of *Vierbund* actions.¹⁷² Moreover, Conrad believed that the United States "wollte auf der Weltbühne nicht nur als Zuseher, sondern als mächtiges Aktivum auftreten, nur als solches konnte es bei Neuordnung der Dinge entscheidend mitsprechen."¹⁷³ Czernin likewise seemed to subscribe to the German standpoint that the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare had a serious chance of rapidly weakening Britain, and this advantage would constitute a decisive setback for the Entente, offsetting whatever the United States might bring.¹⁷⁴ As his German colleagues had done, he underestimated the time it would take for American troops to become a force on the Continent.¹⁷⁵ Nevertheless, Czernin

¹⁶⁹ Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern, 26. 2. 1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien,

Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April /Karton 57.

¹⁷⁰ "Als im Frühjahr 1917 Amerika nach Aufnahme des verschärften U-Bootkriegs in den Weltkrieg eintrat, konnte es wohl kaum mehr einen Zweifel geben, dass wir – wenn man zu keinem Verständigungsfrieden gelangen konnte – schließlich den Krieg verlieren würden." *Polzer-Hoditz*, Kaiser Karl, 315. It is interesting here that „Verständigungsfrieden“ and losing the war are seen as oppositional. Evidently, peace had replaced victory as the most positive outcome imaginable.

¹⁷¹ *Conrad*, Private Aufzeichnungen, 124f.

¹⁷² *Conrad*, Private Aufzeichnungen, 124f.

¹⁷³ *Conrad*, Private Aufzeichnungen, 125.

¹⁷⁴ *Czernin*, Im Weltkrieg, 196f. Czernin's narrative often contradicts itself. After making the case for the U-Boot Krieg's potential to completely incapacitate Britain, he then characterizes the German hope to do so as "trügerisch." *Czernin*, Im Weltkrieg, 202f.

¹⁷⁵ *Czernin*, Im Weltkrieg, 197.

acknowledged that the Entente scored a moral victory with the United States, which might yet prove decisive.¹⁷⁶ This curious mix of alarmist and flippant attitudes among Austro-Hungarian decision-makers concerning the entrance of the United States into the world conflict reflects the American president's own uncertain stance on the subject of the Dual Monarchy. The relationship between the United States and Austria-Hungary would be in a near-constant state of flux up until the last few months of the war, keeping the empire's future uncertain.

The Ottoman Empire and the Russian Empire

Although Austria-Hungary in the Sixtus Brief directed its negotiation at the Western powers and in a sense, tried to act as one of them, did it in fact have more in common with its neighbors to the south and east? The First World War would bring down three ancient land empires. Each proved incapable of keeping up with the more vigorous Great Powers in military expenditure and each crumbled under the strain of the protracted war. Of these, Russia was the only one whose ruling structure collapsed before the end of the war due to revolution, and was thus able to exit the conflict before it suffered catastrophic military defeat. The Ottoman Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, both of whom struggled mightily to maintain their territorial integrity, would be defeated at the end of 1918 and subsequently dismembered. Russia, the Ottoman Empire, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire all expressed desires for peace, more specifically for a separate peace, in the spring of 1917. What is of interest here is the emphasis on a separate peace as opposed to a general one. Russia and the Ottoman Empire, unlike Austria-Hungary had no intentions of bringing about an end to the conflict as a whole.

At the same time that Sixtus began his overtures to the French government, Nicholas II was deposed in the February Revolution (March 1917). Did Karl fear that he might suffer the same fate as the tsar,¹⁷⁷ should the war cause so much stress to the populace that it induced a revolution? Looking to the south and east, did the Habsburg Empire, always struggling with its own multinational identity, feel itself threatened as the Ottoman Empire came apart at the

¹⁷⁶ Czernin, *Im Weltkrieg*, 201.

¹⁷⁷ The ultimate fate of the tsar and his family were not anticipated at this time. Ministerial briefings as well as Sixtus' statements to the French government sporadically raise the question of the Romanovs' whereabouts, indicating a certain amount of worry on the part of the European ruling class.

seams? Both cases, though they are of little direct relevance to Karl's peace attempt, ominously underline Austria-Hungary's struggles in the second half of the war.

The Russian Empire

In the case of Russia, the idea for a separate peace came early and appeared often. Its Entente membership had been based more on practicality than on underlying similarities or a common world-view, so it seemed natural that Russia might exit the conflict without forcing its allies to do the same. By March of 1917, the Tsar had abdicated and the government that had originally gotten the empire involved in the war was on its way out. The war was not yet over for Russia, which continued to fight into the spring in compromised capacity, but it would come soon. A separate peace by a new government with different aims was anticipated.

In his analysis of Britain's role in maintaining the European balance of power, Paul Schroeder implies that Russia was growing in strength in the early twentieth century.¹⁷⁸ While Russia certainly had advantages going into the war, it nevertheless displayed signs of weakness. A decade before the First World War broke out, the mighty Russian army had suffered defeat at the hands of a minor power, Japan. Superior manpower was its chief advantage; its geopolitical position, forcing the Central Powers to fight on two fronts, afforded another. Whether the Russian empire seemed to be on the brink of collapse in 1914, as Schroeder claims Austria-Hungary was, should be examined in light of the facts. Without suffering overwhelming defeat or invasion, the Russian imperial government was toppled after two and a half years of war. Its strength, therefore, appears to have been at least somewhat of an illusion.¹⁷⁹ Other than the Brusilov Offensive, it failed to score significant victories over the Austro-Hungarians, whose army should have crumbled in the face of the Russian advance.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ Paul W. Schroeder, *World War I as Galloping Gertie. A Reply to Joachim Remak*. In: Paul W. Schroeder (Hg.), *Systems, Stability, and Statecraft: Essays on the International History of Modern Europe* (New York¹ 2004) 137-156, here 154.

¹⁷⁹ *Creuzberger* claims that Russia's weaknesses by 1914 were well known by Germany and Great Britain, but led to no diminishment of Russian power in their eyes. Stefan *Creuzberger*, *German and British Policy towards Russia in the period of the decline of Tsarist Empire. A Comparison*. In: Emil Brix, Klaus Koch, Elisabeth *Vyslonzil* (Hg.), *The Decline of Empires* (München/Wien 2001) 88-98, here 89.

¹⁸⁰ This was even encouraged by the Germans, as evidenced in a letter from Bethmann-Hollweg to Karl and Czernin on May 11th: "Die Entlastung im Osten würde ferner der österreichisch-ungarischen Monarchie

The Russian Revolution was a military boon to the Central Powers. Although the provisional government did not immediately halt military action on the front, the end of Russian involvement in the war seemed imminent. This development would have had positive implications for Austria-Hungary, as it could then concentrate its forces on Italy.¹⁸¹ Yet the practical advantage sowed private concerns among fellow absolutist rulers. The largest land empire in Europe had suddenly crumbled from within, without warning and without outside involvement. Brennan draws a connection between the events of the Russian Revolution and the Austro-Hungarian Kaiser's own actions. His description of the effect of the tsar's deposition on the Central Powers and particularly on Karl, indicates that the young Kaiser had profound fears that the same thing might happen to him.¹⁸² Growing social unrest underlined his concerns. Czernin was also deeply affected, writing in his memoirs "[f]ünf Monarchen sind in diesem Krieg entthront worden, und die verblüffende Leichtigkeit, mit welcher jetzt die stärkste Monarchie der Welt gestürzt worden ist, möge dazu beitragen nachdenklich zu stimmen und sich des Satzes zu erinnern: Exempla trahunt."¹⁸³ For Czernin, the example set a new and uncertain tone for the rest of the war and indeed for the world situation as a whole.¹⁸⁴ Waging war whilst ignoring domestic concerns could evidently exact a terrible cost on the regime in power, and the peoples of Austria-Hungary, while not openly clamoring for peace, were suffering greatly under the hardships brought by war, and their discontent threatened to turn dangerous.¹⁸⁵ These events, taking place in the spring of 1917, served as the immediate backdrop to the Sixtus negotiations in France.

weiteres Menschenmaterial zur erfolgreichen Durchführung der Kämpfe an der italienischen Front bis zur Beendigung des Krieges verschaffen." *Czernin*, *Im Weltkrieg*, 205.

¹⁸¹ Brennan writes that Czernin was particularly motivated by this possibility. This, however, raises the question of whether Austria-Hungary might be actually able to regain autonomy should the Russian enemy evaporate, or if this thought was held only by Czernin. *Brennan*, *Reforming Austria-Hungary*, 167.

¹⁸² *Brennan*, *Reforming Austria-Hungary*, 164f.

¹⁸³ *Czernin*, *Im Weltkrieg*, 199.

¹⁸⁴ . "Dieser Krieg hat eine neue Ära der Weltgeschichte eröffnet: er hat keine Vorbilder und keine Vorakten.... Der Staatsmann, der nicht blind oder taub ist, muss wahrnehmen, wie die dumpfe Verzweiflung der Bevölkerung täglich zunimmt: er muss das dumpfe Grollen hören, das in den breiten Massen vernehmbar ist, und er muss, wenn er sich seiner Verantwortung bewusst ist, mit diesem Faktor rechnen." *Czernin*, *Im Weltkrieg*, 200.

¹⁸⁵ *Brennan*, *Reforming Austria-Hungary*, 165.

The Ottoman Empire

After the United States broke off diplomatic relations with Germany shortly after the resumption of the *U-Boot Krieg*, the Ottoman Empire resisted severing relations with the North American power. In discussions with the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Ministry, they expressed their trepidation in regard to a possible German-American war and hoped that Germany would refrain from causing any difficulties.¹⁸⁶ Like Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire was a vast, ancient, and multinational political entity ill-equipped to survive the unique challenges posed to it in the twentieth century. Both empires had been outstripped by other European powers, who cast an envious eye on their advantageous geostrategic settings. The multinational identity of Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire moreover fostered irredentist activity outside their borders and independence movements within.

During the Balkan wars, the Ottoman Empire had lost 80 percent of its European territory and 16 percent of its population.¹⁸⁷ In the first Balkan war, the Ottoman Empire fought against an alliance of small, relatively weak states that had sprung up along its borders in Southern Europe. If the old empire was unable to secure victory in this war, how would it fare against a Great Power opponent? Nevertheless, like Austria-Hungary, it had entered the First World War with some optimism.¹⁸⁸ Since the Ottoman Empire began its long, slow decline, it had been a magnet for other European powers that wanted to take advantage of its geostrategic position and weak hold on its own territory. In a sense, the situation of the Ottoman Empire superficially resembled that of Austria-Hungary, albeit much farther along in its decline. Whether or not decline was indeed taking place, or if there existed hope for a turnaround, the effect on both empires' places in the war was similar. Both were on the defensive, and fought to protect their territorial integrity against inside and outside threats. In

¹⁸⁶ Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern 11. 3. 1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April /Karton 57.

¹⁸⁷ Mustafa Aksakal, *The Ottoman Road to War in 1914. The Ottoman Empire and the First World War* (Cambridge¹ 2008) 22.

¹⁸⁸ Bethmann-Hollweg even went so far as to assert in a speech to the Reichstag one year into the conflict „[d]ie Türkei feiert in diesem Kriege eine glänzende Wiedergeburt.“ *Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, Sonnabend den 29. Mai 1915.

the best case scenario, the war would re-forge their national identities and force them to modernize.¹⁸⁹

In his book *The Ottoman Road to War in 1914: The Ottoman Empire and the First World War* on the beginnings of the First World War in the Ottoman Empire, Mustafa Aksakal argues that the intellectual climate of Turkey in the immediate aftermath of the Balkan Wars was favorable to the outbreak of the First World War in much the same way the “Spirit of 1914” gripped Austria-Hungary. Both Turkey and Austria-Hungary viewed the war as inevitable and unavoidable.¹⁹⁰ The old regime in the Ottoman Empire was visibly weakening. With the Young Turk revolution of 1908, the sultan lost some of his traditional powers and was forced to reinstate the constitution. Manfred Pittioni, in an essay entitled “The Economic Decline of the Ottoman Empire: From a World Economic Empire to Regional Power,” blames the Young Turks for what he considers to be an overhasty decision to ally the Ottoman Empire with Germany.¹⁹¹ Although the Ottomans were skeptical and suspicious of all major European powers on the eve of war, they united themselves with the Central Powers at least partially over shared fears of Pan-Slavism.¹⁹² Fear of Russia crafted common enemies when history – from the events of the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire seemed more often aligned with Great Britain – did not.

The Ottoman Empire became exhausted by the demands of the war even before Austria-Hungary. Its fronts encompassed Russia, the Balkans, and its territories in the Middle East, where it fought against Britain and France. Around the time of the peace talks of winter 1916/1917, a sense of fatalism on the subject of the Ottoman ally is detectable in the reports of the Austro-Hungarian foreign ministry.¹⁹³ The Austro-Hungarians remarked on the

¹⁸⁹ According to Aksakal, „The causes of the empire’s chronic fragility were no secret... The empire would have to make great strides in each area of the modern state and modern society: military, financial, and industrial strength; administrative efficiency; and an educated and diligent citizenry united in its desire to serve and to defend the state.” *Aksakal, The Ottoman Road to War*, 24.

¹⁹⁰ “...it becomes apparent that, in regard to 1914, the intellectual and emotional climate was consistent with, and, in fact, fostered, the embrace of war in 1914. That decision was the outcome less of irredentist ideas than the firm conviction that war inevitably would have to be faced once again in the near future.” *Aksakal, The Ottoman Road to War in 1914*, 29.

¹⁹¹ Manfred *Pittioni*, *The Economic Decline of the Ottoman Empire. From a World Economic Empire to Regional Power*. In: Emil Brix, Klaus Koch, Elisabeth Vyslonzil (Hg.), *The Decline of Empires* (München/Wien 2001) 21-44, here 37.

¹⁹² *Pittioni*, *The Economic Decline of the Ottoman Empire*, 34f.

¹⁹³ „... dass dieser Weltkrieg um die Existenz der Türkei gehe, deren Ende mit ihrer Vertreibung aus Europa gekommen wäre.“ Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern 27. 1. 1917. Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv

“pessimism” of the Turks;¹⁹⁴ yet they themselves were facing significant difficulties in maintaining morale. Karl’s own take on the futility of the Austro-Hungarian effort should the United States enter the war is evidence for similar pessimism in the Dual Monarchy.¹⁹⁵ Nowhere is it expressly stated, as it is with the Russian case, that the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire before and during the war was taken as a warning by Austria-Hungary. Yet such admissions might, presumably, remain unspoken. In a rather telling aside on the state of the war in late spring 1917, Czernin remarks in his memoirs that the Ottoman Empire was offered a chance for separate peace by one of the Entente members; the Ottomans however refused to allow themselves to be separated from their allies and declared themselves ready only to consider a general peace without annexation.¹⁹⁶ Whether such action constitutes a display of loyalty or one of resignation is impossible to ascertain.

The United States Enters the War

In a note to the United States announcing their intentions on the 31st of January, Germany made its case on the basis of previous violations to the freedom of the seas as well as to human rights committed by Great Britain.¹⁹⁷ The United States responded by breaking off diplomatic relations with Germany a few days later, though it did not declare war outright. It would take the sinking of several American ships by German U-Boats and the British interception of the Zimmermann telegram to convince the United States to abandon neutrality and enter the war. The United States Congress declared war on Germany on the 6th of April, 1917, but waited until December 7th of that year to do the same with Austria-Hungary. It never declared war on the Ottoman Empire. As the United States’ history of loans to France and Britain may have indicated, the primary destination of the American doughboys was France; they were intended to reinforce French and British troops. The United States did not formally join the Entente, claiming instead the status of an “Associated Power.” However it

Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April /Karton 57.

¹⁹⁴ Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern, 11. 1. 1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April /Karton 57.

¹⁹⁵ *Polzer-Hoditz*, Kaiser Karl, 317.

¹⁹⁶ *Czernin*, Im Weltkrieg, 195.

¹⁹⁷ Address of President Wilson to the Senate, 52f.

chose to become involved, it decisively broke the stalemate and set the stage for an Entente victory.

The entrance of the United States into the war would not immediately be of consequence to Austria-Hungary. Nonetheless, the arrival of American troops on the continent heightened Austria-Hungary's sense of desperation. The aforementioned moral righteousness that came with Wilson's decision to side with the Entente was aimed directly at Austria-Hungary's minority populations. Perhaps more concretely problematic were the implications for the Entente war effort. Peace attempts rode on presumptions of war-weariness. Fresh troops and resources would reinvigorate the Entente, making an attempt by Austria-Hungary to extricate itself even more difficult. Rather than hope for a general peace and one without victory for either side, Austria-Hungary found itself in a self-perpetuating and ever-expanding conflagration. Despite diminishing hope in an even faintly positive conclusion to the war, the empire increased its efforts to exhaust all possible routes to peace.

THE SIXTUS PEACE ATTEMPTS

As early as August 1914, Sixtus, his brother Xaver, their sister Zita, and her husband Karl, the heir to the Habsburg throne, agreed that the growth of Prussian military power posed an equal threat to the security of France and the self-sufficiency of Austria-Hungary.¹⁹⁸ By the beginning of 1915, Sixtus had already begun exploring the possibility of negotiating a separate peace for the Dual Monarchy through Pope Benedict XV.¹⁹⁹ While his efforts in the first two years of the war came to naught, by 1916 the situation had changed. With Karl's ascension to the throne, Sixtus and Xaver were now brothers-in-law to the Austro-Hungarian emperor; the empire moreover had fulfilled its original war aims and its people suffered greatly on the home front, making an exit from the conflict increasingly urgent. Graf Arthur Polzer-Hoditz, serving as Chief of Cabinet, quotes the new Kaiser as saying on the 14th of February, 1917: "Wir werden den Krieg verlieren, wir müssen ihn verlieren, wenn Amerika in den Krieg eintritt. Es ist ein Unrecht, das man an unserm Volk begeht, dass man es in Siegeshoffnung erhält."²⁰⁰ Apart from his humanitarian concerns, Karl recognized that the fate of his empire itself was at stake.

Reconstructing the Sixtus peace attempts poses several challenges. As this was a secret peace attempt, there is no direct evidence in the ministry records, though there are some hints that negotiations between France and Austria-Hungary are taking place. First-hand accounts by those involved tend to tell only one side of the story, yet in assessing motives, these perspectives can be useful. In the book *Austria's Peace Offer 1916-1917* written in 1921, Sixtus, with the help of historian G. de Manteyer, presents his account of the mission. It is unclear how much of the book was written by Sixtus himself and how much should be attributed to Manteyer. In an introductory letter, Sixtus endorses the entire book as accurate, and thus it may be read as a first-person account. Clear arguments run through the narrative, among these the unambiguous framing of Sixtus' mission as that of a separate peace attempt, the untrustworthiness of Czernin, and the unreasonableness of Germany. With these angles in mind, one might assume the book was intended as a response to the Sixtus Affair of 1918,

¹⁹⁸ In August of 1914, Sixtus, Xaver, Karl, and Zita agreed that „ein Anwachsen der preußischen Militärmacht“ would be „für die Sicherheit Frankreichs wie für die Selbständigkeit des Habsburgerreiches in gleicher Weise bedrohlich.““ *Steglich, Die Friedenspolitik der Mittelmächte 1917/1918*, Bd. 1, 15.

¹⁹⁹ *Steglich, Die Friedenspolitik der Mittelmächte 1917/1918*, Bd. 1, 15.

²⁰⁰ *Polzer-Hoditz, Kaiser Karl*, 317.

and thus as an exoneration of Sixtus and Karl's actions. Nevertheless, *Austria's Peace Offer* provides a window into the individual intentions of Sixtus, albeit with focus brought by hindsight. Polzer-Hoditz provides another post-war account of what transpired during these months. Like Sixtus, he is inclined to portray Karl in a favorable light, probably due to the negativity surrounding the Sixtus Affair and the destruction of Austria-Hungary. Secondary source depictions of the events of spring 1917 are also often colored by the Sixtus Affair of the following year, though several such as those written by Wolfgang Steglich and Robert Kann, address the logic behind the peace attempts themselves. With these considerations in mind, this chapter seeks to analyze the Sixtus Brief in regard to the circumstances which shaped it and the tactics it attempted to use.

The Four Points

The Sixtus Brief delineated a plan of action for Austria-Hungary and the Entente in which the empire redefined its standpoint to be more in line with French and English war aims. Though in essence, the Sixtus Brief proposed Austro-Hungarian divestment from territories over which it had little if any jurisdiction, one might interpret a desire to leave Eastern problems behind and get closer to the West. This makes sense in the context of the war situation. On the (south) Eastern and Western fronts, an independent small kingdom would be reestablished and land belonging to its ally were to be traded for peace. The two points regarding the Western Front, the restitution of Alsace-Lorraine to France and the reestablishment of the Kingdom of Belgium, deliberately put Austria-Hungary in conflict with Germany; those concerning the East and South, Serbia and Constantinople, respectively, pointed towards disinterest and the end of Austro-Hungarian involvement in these regions.

Alsace-Lorraine

Alsace-Lorraine was easily the most controversial part of the Sixtus Brief. For nearly half a century leading up to the Great War, these borderlands were a delicate issue for France, whose war effort, as expressed to its citizens, centered on the return of lost territories. Such a central place in the mythology of the war may not be borne out in actual strategy or politics, but appeared as a panacea in peace efforts. In discussions with Austrian diplomats in Bern, Emile Haguenin, a French professor who had worked in Germany prior to the outbreak of the war, claimed to speak for Aristide Briand when he claimed "die Freundschaft Frankreichs sei

nur durch diese Abtretung zu gewinnen,²⁰¹ that peace and even a reorientation of French foreign policy in favor of Germany would be made possible by the return of Alsace-Lorraine. Such sentiments are supported by scholarly assessments of the situation. David Stevenson in his book *French War Aims Against Germany, 1914 – 1919* emphasizes the significance of Alsace-Lorraine in the formulation of French war aims; the territory not only carries historical and thereby popular significance, but the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine and the Saar region and the resulting acquisition of iron, coal, and heavy industry, would strike a blow to the German war machine and dramatically increase French material output. The clear military-industrial advantages to annexation were pushed for by the *Comite des forges* and also helped delineate borders.²⁰² Alsace-Lorraine was rich in iron ore, the Saar region in coking coal.²⁰³ Thus to reap the benefits of one, the other was also needed. But were the military and popular-propagandistic aspects of Alsace-Lorraine enough to warrant its central position in peace talks? In his own discussion of the Sixtus peace attempts, Robert Kann argues that Alsace-Lorraine, far from the key to peace, was not as crucial as Habsburg negotiators were wont to believe.²⁰⁴

Official positions on Alsace-Lorraine were ambiguous, perhaps due to the dichotomy between the strategic and popular aspects of the question. A concrete and unified position on Alsace-Lorraine was yet to be reached by the French government, at least as of the Sixtus peace attempts in March 1917. In 1915, it was still unclear as to whether or not the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine would be decided by a plebiscite.²⁰⁵ Rene Viviani, the French Prime Minister during the first year of the war, effectively ended the plebiscite debate, declaring the acquisition of Alsace-Lorraine a French war aim, and being careful to call it a “restitution” rather than a “conquest.”²⁰⁶ Because Alsace-Lorraine was unjustly taken from France, according to his logic, no plebiscite was required.²⁰⁷ Several years later, the diplomat Jules Cambon would deliberately avoid the possibility of a plebiscite due to fears that the

²⁰¹ *Steglich*, Die Friedenspolitik der Mittelmächte 1917/1918, Bd. 1, 26.

²⁰² David Stevenson, *French War Aims Against Germany, 1914-1919* (New York/Oxford¹ 1982) 38.

²⁰³ Stevenson, *French War Aims Against Germany*, 39.

²⁰⁴ Kann, Die Sixtusaffäre und die Geheimen Friedensverhandlungen Österreich-Ungarn, 60.

²⁰⁵ Stevenson, *French War Aims Against Germany*, 17.

²⁰⁶ Stevenson, *French War Aims Against Germany*, 17.

²⁰⁷ Stevenson, *French War Aims Against Germany*, 17.

inhabitants of Alsace-Lorraine would not choose France.²⁰⁸ Nevertheless, the return of Alsace-Lorraine continually appears in statements concerning French war aims, and it is probably safe to say that there was no clear and lasting consensus even at the top level of the French government: the cultural importance of Alsace-Lorraine proved difficult to separate from its still-considerable strategic significance. However, by February of 1917, a consensus appears to emerge among French government elites that they would fight for the return of Alsace-Lorraine with its 1790 borders, including the entirety of the Saarland.²⁰⁹

Belgium

Belgium's inclusion in the Sixtus Brief may be a moral point; Germany's treatment of the small nation provided potent fuel for Entente propaganda. Kaiser Karl himself felt it necessary to clarify his ethical position on the subject, writing "[w]ir haben die größten Sympathien für Belgien und wissen, dass ihm Unrecht geschehen ist. Entente und wir werden die Schäden vergüten."²¹⁰ Apparent here is the emotional language – Belgium has been wronged, and the injustice must be rectified. Germany, the perpetrator, goes unmentioned, but clearly implicated. Karl sides his empire with the Entente on the moral high ground and demonstrates Austria-Hungary's willingness to work Entente, rather than with Germany. Though this point is far from being the most controversial, the concession to Entente propaganda and to unambiguous French and English war aims that it represents is indicative of something much deeper: Austria-Hungary wanted to demonstrate greater affinity for the Entente world view than for the German one.

Serbia

The fate of Serbia was conspicuously absent from previous peace offers. As Prince Sixtus presented his points to the Austro-Hungarian Kaiser in February, Karl promptly adopted the first three points. The Kaiser did not, however, immediately agree to the inclusion of Serbia in the Sixtus Brief – he had his own plans for the Balkans. The defeated kingdom, in Karl's original conception, was to become part of a union of Southern Slav states, ruled by an

²⁰⁸ *Stevenson, French War Aims Against Germany*, 51. This raises the question as to whether Alsace-Lorraine is a self-determination issue, which will be addressed later in the thesis.

²⁰⁹ *Stevenson, French War Aims Against Germany*, 52.

²¹⁰ *Steglich, Die Friedenspolitik der Mittelmächte 1917/1918*, Bd. 1, 19.

Austrian Habsburg archduke. By the end of the month, the Kaiser acquiesced to his brother-in-law, abandoning his Southern Slav state.²¹¹ Polzer-Hoditz suggests that Sixtus was able to convince Karl that an independent Serbia was in accordance with the wishes of the French government, though he himself believed that Karl's vision, which would serve nationalistic as well as economic interests, was the better idea.²¹² Kaiser Karl's change of opinion on Serbia is a powerful argument for Sixtus' ownership of his peace proposal. That Sixtus was able to persuade Kaiser Karl to cede power over a defeated opponent - the original adversary - moves the focus away from Central and Eastern Europe and sets Sixtus' argument squarely in the field of the Western Powers, where Austria-Hungary saw little involvement.

Constantinople

Austria-Hungary's offer to "disinterest" itself from Constantinople was in effect a concession to the Russian Empire and constituted yet another betrayal of an ally, albeit one that by 1917 was ready to conclude a peace itself. At this point, particularly in light of the German decision to resume unrestricted submarine warfare and the likelihood of American involvement on the side of the Entente, the Ottoman Empire's dedication to its allies and the war grew tenuous. By the middle of January 1917, reports from Constantinople overwhelmingly indicated pessimism and war-weariness.²¹³ English maneuvers in the Middle East were rapidly bringing down the Turkish front and a telegram from the k. u. k. ambassador stationed in Constantinople indicates "dass wir und Deutschland eine Verständigung auf Kosten der Türkei nicht aus dem Wege gehen würden."²¹⁴ Austro-Hungarian "disinterest" from Constantinople might indeed reflect Austro-Hungarian desires to distance itself from a weak ally of diminishing strategic importance.

Wolfgang Steglich, in his chronological account of the Sixtus negotiations, suggests that the inclusion of Constantinople was also geared towards French interests;²¹⁵ one might also

²¹¹ Steglich, *Die Friedenspolitik der Mittelmächte 1917/1918*, Bd. 1, 17.

²¹² Polzer-Hoditz, *Kaiser Karl*, 323.

²¹³ Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern, 11. 1. 1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April / Karton 57.

²¹⁴ Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern, 13. 1. 1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April / Karton 57.

²¹⁵ Steglich, *Die Friedenspolitik der Mittelmächte 1917/1918*, Bd. 1, 39.

assume it to be in the interest of England, which was heavily engaged with the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East. That Austria-Hungary would make concessions solely to Russian interests at this point in the war is doubtful, as the Russian front was clearly in a state of collapse and the Revolution had started. As of March 1915, France threw its support behind Russian designs on the Ottoman-controlled Straits.²¹⁶ Yet French endorsement of Russian war aims was not without controversy. While France needed and valued its Russian ally, it was also wary of Russian power, at least in the early stages of the war.²¹⁷ In this context, the geopolitical importance of Austria-Hungary came into play. Stevenson identifies Austria-Hungary as a potential area of conflict for France and Russia due to the French need to check Russian influence over eastern and southeastern Europe.²¹⁸ France, in his view, aimed to reduce Austria-Hungary through self-determination to German-Austrians and Hungarians, but this would likely result in the annexation of German-Austria to Germany and leave Russia unchallenged in the east.²¹⁹ Austria-Hungary was therefore necessary to French policy aims – up to a point. The inclusion of Constantinople in the Sixtus Brief demonstrates that Austria-Hungary understood the significance of this area and of the interplay of French, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian interests. Ultimately, in “disinteresting” itself from Constantinople with the Sixtus peace proposals, Austria-Hungary put the issue into French hands.

Italy

If peace was to be made on the basis of territorial concessions, the Sixtus Brief had a glaring omission. Austria-Hungary did possess hotly-contested land that could be ceded in the interests of peace, but for a variety of reasons, it refrained. This barrier to peace was two-sided. Italy, as it was factored into the Entente’s decision-making on Austria-Hungary, could either be taken as a serious strategic issue or as an excuse for France and England to refuse considering peace without victory. Was this situation inevitable? Or could France have, if truly interested in ending the war or at least in a separate peace with Austria-Hungary, worked to bring about a compromise between the Habsburgs and their Italian enemies? The

²¹⁶ Stevenson, *French War Aims Against Germany*, 25.

²¹⁷ Stevenson, *French War Aims Against Germany*, 28.

²¹⁸ Stevenson, *French War Aims Against Germany*, 28.

²¹⁹ Stevenson, *French War Aims Against Germany*, 28.

Sixtus Brief contained no concessions of Austro-Hungarian territory, although this would have given weight to the sincerity of Habsburg intentions for peace. Had Sixtus decided to offer k. u. k. lands in exchange for a separate peace, the most obvious choice would be those claimed and fought for by Italy. An about-face on the Italian question in the Sixtus peace attempts would not have been untimely. The ascension of Karl to the throne had great potential to change Austro-Italian relations, at least from the Austrian side. Not only was his wife Zita Italian-born, but Karl did not have the significant historical baggage that the previous emperor did. Franz-Joseph, who had personally commanded Austrian armies at Solferino, was unlikely to reconsider this ancient enemy. However, whatever change that could be made to Austrian-Italian relations needed to be dealt in land, rather than in sentiments and diplomacy, a difficult proposition for an empire fighting to preserve its territorial integrity.

At the outset of the war in 1914, Italy was something of a free agent. Since Austria-Hungary neglected to inform its neighbor of the decision to take action against Serbia, Italy did not feel itself obligated to honor its alliance with the Habsburgs.²²⁰ Courted by both sides, Italy declared neutrality but did not break off formal connections to the Triple Alliance.²²¹ The crux of Italy's allegiance and military involvement revolved around festering territorial questions. Under the auspices of loyalty to the Triple Alliance, Italy requested Austria to compensate it for its efforts with territories the k. u. k. armies conquered in the Balkans.²²² While Germany urged its ally to keep Italian "loyalty" by all means necessary, compliance with Italy's demands proved impossible on both sides of the Leitha. Where Austrians balked at yielding to its traditional enemy, Tisza viewed a handover of the Trentino as possibly foreshadowing acquiescence to Romanian demands on Hungarian Transylvania.²²³ From the beginning, Italy represented what Austria-Hungary most feared: territorial dismemberment. Any land ceded to or conquered by Italy arguably set a dangerous precedent,²²⁴ demonstrating to the empire's other constituent nationalities that they too might be able to strike out on their own.

²²⁰ Kann, *A History of the Habsburg Empire*, 469.

²²¹ Kann, *A History of the Habsburg Empire*, 470.

²²² Kann, *A History of the Habsburg Empire*, 470.

²²³ Kann, *A History of the Habsburg Empire*, 471.

²²⁴ Kann, *Die Sixtusaffäre und die Geheimen Friedensverhandlungen Österreich-Ungarn*, 64.

In March 1915, Foreign Minister Baron von Burian offered Italy the Trentino; by the following April, the Entente and Italy concluded a secret pact, the Treaty of London. With this pact, Italy stood to gain not only the Trentino, but also Cisalpine Tyrol, Trieste, Istria and its islands, Gorizia, Gradisca, Dalmatia and its islands, the Dodecanese islands, and the islands of Canidoe, Palazzuoli, San Pietro di Nembi, Plavnik, Unie, Asinello, and Gruicia.²²⁵ This, Kann notes, went far beyond what was purely necessary to gain Italian allegiance, and in fact hampered future peace efforts.²²⁶ The treaty delineated a geostrategic plan which would have allowed Italy a moderate degree of regional power, while attempting to relieve pressure on the Eastern Front.²²⁷ In essence, the Italian Front was supposed to draw Austro-Hungarian attention away from Russia; Russia however could not subsequently shift its entire focus to Germany, as this would doom the Italian war effort.²²⁸ The Russian and Italian fronts were to balance each other, forcing Austria-Hungary to divide its forces. The opening of an Italian front was well-integrated into a general Entente war strategy, and Italy would be duly rewarded in the form of indemnities as a partner in the combined effort.²²⁹ As soon as Italy turned against Austria-Hungary, the empire abandoned any intentions of territorial concessions to its neighbor, regardless of their potential effect on the war. Immediately after the Treaty of London was concluded, Italy declared war on Austria-Hungary, waiting until the following year to do the same for Germany.

Italian Demands for Peace

The war against Italy proved durable, and as 1916 came to a close, this front was the only remaining unsettled issue for the empire. On November 26th, Burian had already asserted that the empire fought solely in self-defense and to maintain its integrity, and when these are secured, the monarchy would pose no further obstruction to peace.²³⁰ During the general peace discussions of December 1916, the Italians put out a list of stipulations under which a separate peace with the Central Powers could be concluded; a full translated copy of this is

²²⁵ Agreement between France, Russia, Great Britain and Italy, Signed at London, April 26th 1915. (London 1920) 3-5.

²²⁶ Kann, *A History of the Habsburg Empire*, 471f.

²²⁷ Agreement between France, Russia, Great Britain and Italy, 2.

²²⁸ Agreement between France, Russia, Great Britain and Italy, 2.

²²⁹ Agreement between France, Russia, Great Britain and Italy, 6.

²³⁰ *Steglich*, *Die Friedenspolitik der Mittelmächte 1917/1918*, Bd. 1, 22.

included in the daily report of the Foreign Ministry on December 27th.²³¹ In essence, the Italians showed a strong adherence to the principle of national self-determination and to some extent, the status quo ante. The Sixtus Brief addressed several of these points, but shied away from the issue of national self-determination, even in cases that would not directly affect Cisleithenia. Italy's peace requirements are, perhaps intentionally, far beyond what it should be able to request under the circumstances, but they provide a window into the Italian mindset and worldview at this time and at this point in the war. Its emphasis on national self-determination as well as on the independence of smaller, less powerful nations, presented a clear threat to Austria-Hungary.

Fighting the "Ancient Enemy"

By the first week of February, the mood in Italy, at least from an Austro-Hungarian viewpoint, had become markedly less demanding. The hoped-for annexation of Trieste had been abandoned; Trentino would now suffice for peace agreements.²³² Moreover, war-weariness was prevalent in Milan and the rest of northern Italy.²³³ The k. u. k. Armee met

²³¹ Bedingungen eines möglichen Friedens

Freiheit der Meere. Lord Grey erklärte sich in einer berühmte Rede bereit, diese Frage zu discutieren.

Allgemeine Abrüstung, so dass ein Angriff unmöglich sei, von wo immer diese kommen möge.

Frankreich – Evacuazion des besetzten Gebietes und Abtretung des französisch sprechenden Theils von Lothringen /: nach dem Nationalitätsprinzip :/ gegen eine gerechte Entschädigung, zum Beispiel: eine Colonie Belgien. – Evacuazion des Territoriums und vollständige Unabhängigkeit jedermann, sei es von Deutschland, Frankreich oder England mit festzusetzenden Garantien.

Italien. – Triest Freie Stadt. – Freie Hand in Albanien. Cession jener Territorien, wo die italienische Sprache das Übergewicht hat, wobei Österreich auf das durch das Nationalitätenprinzip geforderte Plebiscit verzichtet.

Serbien. - Wiederherstellung, abzüglich der durch den zweiten Balkankrieg [sic] erworbenen Territorien.

Rumänien – Wiederherstellung, abzüglich der durch den zweiten Balkankrieg erworbenen Territorien.

Montenegro. – Wiederherstellung in der Folge wird das Volk über sein Schicksal entscheiden und sich wahrscheinlich mit Serbien vereinigen wollen.

England. – Ebenso wie Deutschland die besetzten Gebiete wird auch England die deutschen Colonien zurückerstatten.

Russland. – Polen erlangt die Unabhängigkeit mit einem neutralen Fürsten an der Spitze, d.i. einem solchen welchen keiner der kriegführenden Mächte angehört; Russland wird im Armenien entschädigt.

Türkei. - Finanzielle Entschädigung für den Verlust Armenien's.

Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern, 27. 12. 1916. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April / Karton 57.

²³² Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern, 7. 2. 1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April / Karton 57.

²³³ Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern, 7.2.1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April / Karton 57.

with moderate success in its alpine war, yet by the time of the Sixtus peace attempts, the strain on both sides of the conflict was apparent. 1917 was to be the culmination of efforts towards a breakthrough for Austria-Hungary. In his memoirs, Conrad von Hötzendorff details plans for a combined German-Austrian offensive early that spring.²³⁴ The combined offensive represented the first instance in which k. u. k. troops required German reinforcement on this front; until mid-1917, they were able to hold the line on their own. Italy's Chief of Staff, Luigi Cadorna, was hardly more competent than Conrad;²³⁵ he decimated his own soldiers with his alpine offensives and failed to achieve any meaningful or lasting breakthroughs into k. u. k. territories.

At the end of March, after Sixtus had already presented his points to the French government, the possibility of separating Italy from its allies was deemed next to impossible.²³⁶ However, it is doubtful that serious attempts had actually been made. At the end of March, the Foreign Ministry believed that the Italian front was in a state of collapse and would soon "follow the example of Russia,"²³⁷ that is, begin the slow process of exiting the war.²³⁸ The Austro-Hungarian diplomat in Berlin was instructed to declare the monarchy unable to grant Italy territorial concessions but prepared to conclude a separate peace on the basis of the status quo ante.²³⁹ Italy however reiterated its claim to Trentino as part of its offer for a separate peace,²⁴⁰ and the issue remained unresolved. The popularity of the war against Italy belied its impracticality; it drained resources and energy that might be more efficiently spent on one

²³⁴ *Conrad*, *Private Aufzeichnungen*, 70f.

²³⁵ *Herwig*, *The First World War*, 152.

²³⁶ Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern, 25. 3. 1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April / Karton 57.

²³⁷ Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern, 1. 4. 1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April / Karton 57.

²³⁸ Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern, 31. 3. 1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April / Karton 57. Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern, 1. 4. 1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April / Karton 57.

²³⁹ Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern, 2. 4. 1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April / Karton 57.

²⁴⁰ Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern, 3. 4. 1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April / Karton 57.

of the more strategically important fronts. Italy entered the war on the basis of extensive territorial claims in Austria, and thus needed a decisive Entente victory; the prospect of a separate peace for Austria-Hungary was for them unacceptable. The collapse of the Russian front in the spring of 1917 directly impacted the Italian campaign against Austria-Hungary, effectively closing down the Eastern Front. In his conversations with French officials, Sixtus tried to establish an armistice with Austria-Hungary as ideal for Italy as well.²⁴¹ The Bourbon prince played both sides, pushing Karl to make concessions in the interest of peace as well as threatening Italy with the full strength of the k. u. k. Armee. It was therefore in Italy's interest to make peace with Austria-Hungary and to scale back its territorial ambitions.

Territorial Concessions

Simultaneously asking Italy and Austria to reassess their territorial claims, and war aims in general, as was done in spring 1917, yielded agreeable intentions from both sides, but no concrete results. Concessions here, or even a ceasefire, would likely do little for the popular image of the emperor or of Austria-Hungary's geopolitical situation, even if they achieved the promised peace. For its own self-image, the empire needed to defeat Italy. It might even be argued that, also for purposes of self-esteem, Austria-Hungary considered negotiation with Italy to be "beneath" it, and for this reason chose only negotiate with major powers, more fitting with its own (self-) perceived status. In his scholarly assessment of the Italian issue for Austria-Hungary, Kann notes that anger over Italy's treason persisted throughout the k. u. k. lands for the duration of the war,²⁴² but also questions if the situation was at all avoidable. He places the blame on Habsburg desires to hold its multinational empire together; concessions and negotiations over territory were made impossible, as they represented a slippery slope, the beginning of the end for Austria-Hungary. Whether this would have indeed happened remains a matter of speculation. In any case, Kann identifies Italy as the main force behind the drive to dismember the monarchy – it was the only Entente power for whom this war aim was at least implicit before 1918.²⁴³

²⁴¹ Manteyer, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 107.

²⁴² Kann, *A History of the Habsburg Empire*, 472.

²⁴³ Kann, *A History of the Habsburg Empire*, 472.

In a letter to Karl dated the 16th of March, Sixtus reported on the relatively positive reception of his ideas and mentioned that no one had raised the issue of Austrian territorial cessions to Italy as a possible fifth point, though the Entente would support Italy's claim to Trieste should Italian troops manage to secure it.²⁴⁴ Sixtus asked the Kaiser to endorse the four points in writing and to stay as close to the original wording as possible, bypassing the "traditional reservations of the Chancelleries."²⁴⁵ In the interest of efficiency, the Kaiser and Sixtus would act autonomously, engaging in traditional or dynastic diplomacy. The personal element as well is emphasized; Sixtus insisted that any delay or ambiguities on the part of Karl would give the impression that he was under Germany's thumb and do little to obfuscate the unfavorable impression created by Czernin's note.²⁴⁶ Sixtus also urged the Kaiser to soften his position on Italy; should the Italian issue present an unsurmountable obstacle that the Entente must include as a fifth point, Karl should, if public opinion allows it, cede Trieste.²⁴⁷ To induce Karl stop a planned Italian offensive, Sixtus built a threatening scenario: if Germany and Austria-Hungary attack Italy, Russia will attack again to reopen the Eastern front, France and England will support Italy with troops and, in Sixtus' own words, "the last hope of peace would automatically vanish."²⁴⁸

By the middle of May, as reported by Polzer-Hoditz, the Italian high command and army were suffering from war weariness and were ready to conclude a peace on the basis of Trento and Aquileja, asking Germany to encourage Austria-Hungary to acquiesce.²⁴⁹ Yet the Austro-Hungarian high command seems to have felt there was little to gain from a diplomatic solution to the Italian issue. In his assessment of the events of early 1917 and the decision not to negotiate with Italy, Polzer-Hoditz writes: "Der Kaiser bemerkte, dass, wollte man unmittelbar mit den Italienern verhandeln, man zu keinem Ende kommen würde. Es müssten vor allem Frankreich, England und Russland entschlossen sein, mit Österreich Frieden zu machen; dann würde man sich zusammensetzen, um die italienischen Forderungen zu besprechen und versuchen, sie zu befriedigen."²⁵⁰ Polzer-Hoditz cites Karl's attention to

²⁴⁴ Manteyer, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 64f.

²⁴⁵ Manteyer, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 65.

²⁴⁶ Manteyer, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 65.

²⁴⁷ Manteyer, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 66f.

²⁴⁸ Manteyer, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 67.

²⁴⁹ Polzer-Hoditz, *Kaiser Karl*, 351f.

²⁵⁰ Polzer-Hoditz, *Kaiser Karl*, 329.

public opinion and “die gerechte Wünsche der österreichischen Bevölkerung,”²⁵¹ who apparently expected a victory. The Austro-Hungarian Kaiser was, moreover, personally moved by his armies’ success on the Italian front.²⁵² Behind the desire to adhere to popular sentiment and jingoism, Karl evidently refused to consider solving the situation without some form of military victory. Polzer-Hoditz’s statement indicates that Karl wanted to negotiate on the level of the major powers, lending support to the theory that Austria-Hungary’s main worry at the beginning of 1917 is not defeat and dismemberment by the Entente, but being forced into a subordinate position by Germany.

Polzer-Hoditz reports that Italy did indeed at the beginning of April 1917 offer to open peace negotiations with Austria-Hungary, asking only for the Italian-speaking part of South Tyrol.²⁵³ Karl had, apparently in light of the peace attempts by Sixtus already underway in France, dismissed the offer.²⁵⁴ In his own account of the proceedings, Sixtus corroborates Polzer-Hoditz’s assessment. Sixtus believed that the Kaiser should indulge the Italians to the furthest possible extent; Karl countered that his reticence to do so was not a matter of pride, but that “nothing would be gained by direct discussion with Italy.”²⁵⁵ Furthermore, Italy has been unable to score meaningful advances into Austrian territory while the k. u. k. Armee fought against the Russians. Sixtus quotes the Kaiser as saying “[t]hey have even forgotten how to deliver the traditional stab in the back.”²⁵⁶ Karl insisted he would deal with Italy only when the rest of the Entente was on his side, but agreed to hold off an offensive planned for that spring.

Austria-Hungary never entered into negotiations with Italy,²⁵⁷ despite the logical benefit of removing the last serious obstacle to peace with minimal loss of territory. By the beginning

²⁵¹ *Polzer-Hoditz*, Kaiser Karl, 329.

²⁵² *Polzer-Hoditz*, Kaiser Karl, 329.

²⁵³ *Polzer-Hoditz*, Kaiser Karl, 348.

²⁵⁴ *Polzer-Hoditz*, Kaiser Karl, 348.

²⁵⁵ *Manteyer*, Austria’s Peace Offer, 77.

²⁵⁶ *Manteyer*, Austria’s Peace Offer, 80.

²⁵⁷ Two telegrams from Czernin indicate that Austria-Hungary was unwilling to conclude a separate peace with Italy on the basis of anything other than the status quo ante, and a point-blank refusal to cede Trentino. SEPARATFRIEDEN-ANBOT ITALIEN VOM APRIL 1917 GEHEIM XLVII/sg. Telegramm in Ziffern an Herrn von Storck, Feldpost 11.- No.66, 2. 4. 1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv I, Geheimakten, Krieg 1914-1918/ Liasse XLVII/5 b-g/ Karton 511; SEPARATFRIEDEN-ANBOT ITALIEN VOM APRIL 1917 GEHEIM XLVII/sg. Telegramm in Ziffern an Prinzen Hohenlohe in Berlin – No. 199, 31. 3. 1917, AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv I, Geheimakten, Krieg 1914-1918/ Liasse XLVII/5 b-g/ Karton 511.

of 1917, k. u. k. diplomats and analysts believed the Italian front to be in a state of collapse;²⁵⁸ the empire at this stage would be unwilling to give up the chance of military victory over their historic enemy. A discussion between Graf Mensdorff and Alix Barton²⁵⁹ at the beginning of April addressed several key diplomatic wishes of Austria-Hungary. The third point concerns Italy, more specifically the responsibilities of France and England to fulfill their obligations, presumably under the Treaty of London, 1915. Barton expressed the belief that negotiations between French and Austro-Hungarian agents would not occur due to mistrust of the Italians. Furthermore, she emphasized French and English trepidation regarding Italy in general, in particular the specificity and intensity with which the country stated its war aims.²⁶⁰ This trepidation, however, did not manifest itself in concrete actions. Though Italy's demands strained its alliances, it never broke them.

Separate or General Peace?

It is difficult to ascertain whether Austria-Hungary hoped for a separate or general peace during the early months of 1917. This ambiguity may have been intentional on the part of

²⁵⁸ „In Mailand und ganz Oberitalien herrscht große Sehnsucht nach Frieden. Die Hoffnung auf Triest hat man in Italien längst aufgegeben und wäre zufrieden bei einem Friedensschluss das sogenannte Trentino zu bekommen.“ Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern, 7. 2. 1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April / Karton 57. Closer to the time of the Sixtus negotiations and the failed Italian bid for a separate peace, the k. u. k. Foreign Ministry seemed to believe that Italy would soon be out of the war. “Im Auswärtigen Amt in Bern wird die Lage in Italien als ungünstig bezeichnet, und herrscht die Aussicht, dass das Königreich nicht mehr lange werden mitmachen können.“ Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern, 31. 3. 1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April / Karton 57. Another indicates that Italy might topple on its own without the Austro-Hungarian army needing to push. “Es herrsche pessimistische Stimmung und vielfach ist die Aussicht verbreitet, dass Italien bald dem Beispiel Russland's folgen werde.” Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern, 1. 4. 1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April / Karton 57.

²⁵⁹ Alix Barton, an Englishwoman, was tasked by a French statesman (unnamed) with mediating discussions between Mensdorff and a representative of the French government. *Steglich*, Die Friedenspolitik der Mittelmächte 1917/1918, Bd. 1, 29.

²⁶⁰ „Der k. und k. Botschafter Graf Mensdorff hatte eine lange Unterredung mit Madame Barton, die in sehr weitschweifigen Weise sprach. Der Botschafter fasst seine Eindrücke aus dieser Unterredung folgendermaßen zusammen 3) sehr ernste Verpflichtungen England's und Frankreichs die Aspirationen Italiens' ... zu erfüllen Was die Möglichkeit einer Begegnung eines französischen Vertrauensmannes mit den Botschafter betrifft, so glaubt sie heute, dass diese am Misstrauen Italiens scheitern. Sie betonte immer wieder, wie ängstlich Frankreich und England bezüglich Italien's wären und wie präzise Italien seine Wünsche formuliere und auf deren Erfüllung dränge.“ Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern, 6. 4. 1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April / Karton 57.

Sixtus, or it may have been the result of disunity among the Austro-Hungarian high command. A separate peace as means to general negotiations seems to have been championed solely by the Austro-Hungarian Kaiser. However, his own actions leave considerable room for interpretation. Karl's goals for his monarchy are stated, in his addendum to a peace note by Czernin on the 20th of February, in unambiguous terms. He emphasizes that his empire is no puppet of Germany, as demonstrated by its refusal to break off relations with the United States;²⁶¹ Karl's lone objective is "die Monarchie in ihrer jetzigen Größe zu erhalten."²⁶² Karl, as opposed to Czernin, whose note stressed that Austria-Hungary and Germany are inseparable,²⁶³ left the door open. He stated his goal as well as his moral position without laying out a definite course of action, and then put the power of decision in the hands of France.

A Separate Peace

Academic opinion is divided on whether a separate or general peace was desired. Steglich's detailed account of the proceedings indicates that Sixtus' intent as of 13. February 1917 was to negotiate a separate peace for Austria-Hungary, though both options were kept open. Sixtus handed Karl's friend and messenger Thomas Graf Erdödy two documents, each structured to appear as though the Kaiser himself had written them, and each setting out a different course of action. One, entitled *Projet de proclamation*, involved a discussion of war aims; Austria-Hungary was to state its own (which were themselves drafted by Sixtus) in the hope that the monarchy's allies would put forth theirs. The other, the *Projet de convention preliminaire*, did not put a premium on open discussion among the Central Powers. Instead, it outlined secret negotiations with the intent of achieving a ceasefire on Austro-Hungarian fighting fronts. By the 16th of February, the Kaiser was set to choose. Kaiser Karl agreed to the first three points of the *Projet de convention preliminaire*; the fourth, concerning Serbia, clashed with his own plans for the Balkans: the creation of a

²⁶¹ "Wir stehen absolut nicht unter Deutschen Hand, so haben wir gegen Deutschlands Willen nicht mit Amerika abgebrochen." Manteyer, Austria's Peace Offer, 53.

²⁶² Manteyer, Austria's Peace Offer, 53.

²⁶³ Manteyer, Austria's Peace Offer, 52.

Southern Slav union under the rule of an Austrian archduke. After less than a week, he apparently acquiesced to the final point and Sixtus set off for France.²⁶⁴

The situation and course of events present more ambiguity. In his assessment, Steglich identifies the content, namely the concrete points set out in the *Projet de convention preliminaire*, as suitable for a general peace, but their form more indicative of a separate peace attempt.²⁶⁵ At the time of the Sixtus peace attempts there was reason to believe in international support for Austria-Hungary taking the role of “Vermittler” or “mediator” in general peace negotiations. The Baron von Musulin, Austria-Hungary’s representative in Bern, had, by March 10th, been made aware of French attempts to get closer to the Habsburg Monarchy²⁶⁶ with the ultimate goal of using the empire to push Germany towards peace. This is supported by the Kaiser’s own secret addendum to the Foreign Minister’s peace note dated February 20th: “Wir werden Frankreich unterstützen und mit allen Mitteln auf Deutschland einen Druck ausüben.”²⁶⁷ Karl further expressed that he would not prevent Germany from ceding Alsace-Lorraine, but emphasized that Germany was engaged in a defensive war as well.²⁶⁸ Steglich views this statement as indicative of Austro-Hungarian intent to involve its ally in negotiations; Karl does not say that *he* will give Alsace-Lorraine to France, but would instead try to pressure Germany into doing so.²⁶⁹ Gary Shanafelt, however, comes down on the side of an unambiguous separate peace. In his book *The Secret Enemy: Austria-Hungary and the German Alliance 1914-1918*, he writes “Sixtus’ whole effort was intended as a separate peace attempt, to lure the Monarchy out of the war so that Germany could then be finished off alone. It was never construed in any other light by Entente statesmen, and it got as far as it did only because of the differences between Karl and Czernin.”²⁷⁰ Ultimately, Shanafelt believes that Karl intended to use the contact that Sixtus

²⁶⁴ Steglich, *Die Friedenspolitik der Mittelmächte 1917/1918*, Bd. 1, 17.

²⁶⁵ Steglich, *Die Friedenspolitik der Mittelmächte 1917/1918*, Bd. 1, 17.

²⁶⁶ Steglich, *Die Friedenspolitik der Mittelmächte 1917/1918*, Bd. 1, 10.

²⁶⁷ Manteyer, *Austria’s Peace Offer*, 53.

²⁶⁸ Steglich, *Die Friedenspolitik der Mittelmächte 1917/1918*, Bd. 1, 19.

²⁶⁹ Steglich, *Die Friedenspolitik der Mittelmächte 1917/1918*, Bd. 1, 19.

²⁷⁰ Shanafelt, *The Secret Enemy*, 129. These differences, according to Shanafelt, centered in this context around their respective feelings towards the Entente. Czernin was far more distrustful of France and Great Britain than was Karl. Whether or not the Entente should be split or collaborated with had implications for the alliance with Germany; these issues will be addressed more fully in the following chapter of this thesis.

established as the beginnings of a general peace, but that he would likely have considered a separate peace should Germany prove intractable.²⁷¹

It does not appear that Sixtus himself had anything in mind other than a separate peace. In talks on the 12th of April between the newly-appointed French prime minister Alexandre Ribot, the diplomat Jules Cambon, Sixtus, the French president Raymond Poincare, and British prime minister David Lloyd George, a unified position on the need to defeat Germany is apparent.²⁷² Furthermore, Sixtus mentions a new possibility, namely that Germany might try to follow Austria to the negotiations table.²⁷³ Rather than a general peace, this, according to Sixtus, would “be the moment for the Allies to split the Germanic block by refusing to have any dealings with Germany while continuing to treat with Austria.”²⁷⁴ Sixtus, in a conversation with the ambassador Paul Cambon on the 14th of April, again expressed the opinion that “the sole object of these negotiations is to isolate Germany, so that we can inflict a crushing defeat upon her later.”²⁷⁵ That this violated treaty obligations to Germany by Austria-Hungary, and put the Habsburg emperor in a difficult situation appeared obvious to Sixtus. From his own account, Sixtus took pains to protect Karl as much as possible, worrying that the Austro-Hungarian Kaiser would be in danger of assassination should Germany become aware of his involvement in the peace attempt.²⁷⁶ These worries were valid, as Sixtus spoke on behalf of the Kaiser while expressing what were essentially his own convictions.

Sixtus had his own views of what he considered “fundamental and pre-requisite”²⁷⁷ to negotiations with France, as expressed in a memorandum to Poincare dated March 5th, 1917; these included the return of Alsace-Lorraine with its 1814 borders, the restoration of Serbia and Belgium, and cession of Constantinople to the Russians.²⁷⁸ Furthermore, Sixtus believed a separate peace with Russia “would be a good basis for the Peace we all desired.”²⁷⁹

²⁷¹ *Shanafelt*, *The Secret Enemy*, 129.

²⁷² *Manteyer*, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 99.

²⁷³ *Manteyer*, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 99.

²⁷⁴ *Manteyer*, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 99.

²⁷⁵ *Manteyer*, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 104.

²⁷⁶ *Manteyer*, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 103.

²⁷⁷ *Manteyer*, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 37.

²⁷⁸ *Manteyer*, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 37.

²⁷⁹ *Manteyer*, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 37.

Austria-Hungary's separate peace, then, might build off of a Russian one. Beginning mid-March 1917, the possibility of a separate peace for Russia was discussed almost daily in the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Ministry.²⁸⁰ But the emphasis on Russia, more specifically the appeal to the Franco-Russian alliance which permeates the Sixtus peace attempts, came too late. Stevenson points out that by the time of the Sixtus negotiations, France was in the process of reorienting itself from its alliance with Russia, now in a state of collapse, to Britain and the United States, which were less inclined to support French designs on Alsace-Lorraine.²⁸¹ The Sixtus Brief, if seen as a separate peace attempt, was geared towards a France whose geostrategic plans included Russia, and who could make use of an ally in Central Europe with which to surround and neutralize Germany.

Polzer-Hoditz provides a rather cautious account of Sixtus' actual intent, claiming only that the prince was concerned about the effect of growing German power on the monarchy and sought to align Austria-Hungary with France, a natural development, seeing that the security of both stood in danger of Prussian militarism.²⁸² In his discussion of the actual course of events, he only mentions a separate peace;²⁸³ his records of the Kaiser's statements repeatedly emphasize the intractability of the Germans, as well as their fixation on a *Siegfrieden*.²⁸⁴ Austria-Hungary's best interest lay with separation from Germany; this was the first step and appeared to meet with universal approval. Even Czernin, regardless of his official statements, was, according to Polzer-Hoditz, in agreement in breaking the alliance.²⁸⁵ Karl's postwar plans, according to Sixtus, would place Austria-Hungary within a "horizontal Alliance" that included France, Russia, and England.²⁸⁶ This runs counter to Karl's oft-stated desire to act as mediator, as such action would rule out any possibility for friendly future relations between Austria and Germany.

²⁸⁰ Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern, 18. 3. 1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April / Karton 57.

²⁸¹ Stevenson, *French War Aims Against Germany*, 61f.

²⁸² Polzer-Hoditz, *Kaiser Karl*, 319.

²⁸³ Polzer-Hoditz, *Kaiser Karl*, 326.

²⁸⁴ Polzer-Hoditz, *Kaiser Karl*, 328f.

²⁸⁵ Polzer-Hoditz, *Kaiser Karl*, 331.

²⁸⁶ Manteyer, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 89.

In the initial memorandum to President Poincare at the beginning of March, Sixtus states “[i]t would be preferable to protect the Monarchy by direct action and only inform Germany after the event.”²⁸⁷ This, under the terms governing relations between the Central Powers, represents a clear breach. Secret talks were allowed, as long as the other was informed that they were taking place and talks which led to peace were to involve both partners.²⁸⁸ Sixtus here proposes taking action and only informing Germany after the decision to abandon it has been completed. Austria would, in his words, “offer Peace to her enemies” while “keeping up an appearance of friendship and alliance with Germany.”²⁸⁹ Sixtus’ discussions with Jules Cambon on the 11th of February, moreover, give an overwhelmingly negative view of the Austro-German alliance. In the transcript of these talks, the belief is expressed that Germany was planning a peace on terms unfavorable not only to the Entente, but also to its ally.²⁹⁰ The case is presented for an Austro-Hungarian armistice, the first peace attempt, they are careful to say, that comes from Austria, rather than from Germany.²⁹¹ The recommended course of action is hardly amenable to anything but a separate peace: “For all these reasons, Austria must act quickly and boldly if she intends not only to make an honorable peace, but also to extricate herself from the clutches of Germany.”²⁹² Germany moreover is once again in the moral wrong, and the desire to make an “honorable peace” forms the basis of the peace attempt. Framed in this fashion, there is little room for an Austro-Hungarian “Vermittler.”

Kaiser Karl as “Vermittler” and the Road to a General Peace

Nowhere in the Sixtus Brief is it explicitly stated that Austria-Hungary serve as a mediator between the Entente and Germany. The prospect is implicit at best, and highly contingent on a separate peace. A separate peace, according to Kann, was wanted only by the Parma family,²⁹³ which would explain why Sixtus presented the offer for a general peace as a separate one. Lloyd George, according to Kann, saw it as a Parma „Family Project,” “thought

²⁸⁷ Manteyer, Austria’s Peace Offer, 38.

²⁸⁸ Kann, A History of the Habsburg Empire, 475.

²⁸⁹ Manteyer, Austria’s Peace Offer, 38.

²⁹⁰ „The object was quite evident. Germany wanted to make peace with Russia, Rumania, Italy, and Serbia at the expense of Austria, to divide the Allies first, and then to face France, England, and Belgium with a point-blank refusal.” Manteyer, Austria’s Peace Offer, 43.

²⁹¹ Manteyer, Austria’s Peace Offer, 43.

²⁹² Manteyer, Austria’s Peace Offer, 43f

²⁹³ Kann, Die Sixtusaffäre und die Geheimen Friedensverhandlungen Österreich-Ungarn, 61.

up in December 1916 and eventually adopted by the Austro-Hungarian Kaiser.²⁹⁴ In general, Kann opines that the peace itself is more important than the terms by which it could be achieved. The Entente, in his words, preferred a separate peace with Austria-Hungary to no peace at all, but they would be inclined to view such a separate peace as a means to a general one.²⁹⁵

That a separate peace with Austria-Hungary was of interest to the Entente should not be attributed to blind hope or egotism on the part of Sixtus. England and France not only had no original conflict with Austria-Hungary, they were both determined to bring Germany to its knees. From a geopolitical standpoint, a separate peace and even a future alliance with Austria-Hungary would be highly beneficial – dismembering the multinational empire and surrounding Germany with small, weak states would not. Reports from the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Ministry corroborate claims that neither France nor England sought to encourage the development of nationalistic movements and dismember Austria-Hungary, placing, in one instance, the blame on Russia.²⁹⁶ Yet individual Entente members left the option for a general peace open. English support for Austro-Hungarian mediation was evident and relatively longstanding. The Austro-Hungarians assumed that England took the peace negotiations seriously, perhaps even using the Russian Revolution as an excuse to involve itself in Habsburg affairs.²⁹⁷ In the words of a British representative, there existed the possibility that “der Monarchie bei den künftigen Friedensverhandlungen als einen Ausgleichselemente eine große und erhabene Rolle zu fallen werde.”²⁹⁸ Even after Sixtus’ first failure in March and Briand had lost his position as Prime Minister, secret negotiations

²⁹⁴ Kann, *Die Sixtusaffäre und die Geheimen Friedensverhandlungen Österreich-Ungarn*, 60.

²⁹⁵ Kann, *Die Sixtusaffäre und die Geheimen Friedensverhandlungen Österreich-Ungarn*, 61.

²⁹⁶ „Über ein Gespräch ... das er vor 2 Wochen mit Briand und Lloyd George gehabt hatte, äußerte sich ein französischer Deputierter in Lausanne ... dahin, dass die Bemerkung über die Nationalitäten und die Zerstückung der Monarchie in der Ententenote an Herr Wilson nur auf Drängen Russlands ... aufgenommen worden wäre, weder England noch Frankreich hätten ein Interesse daran.“ Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern, 16. 3. 1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April / Karton 57.

²⁹⁷ Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern 22. 3. 1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April / Karton 57.

²⁹⁸ Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern 22.3.1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April / Karton 57.

between French, English, and Austrian representatives were, on Entente initiative, scheduled to take place in Switzerland.²⁹⁹

Though the prospect of a separate peace as precursor to a general peace was extremely attractive from the Austro-Hungarian perspective, the Entente's enthusiasm was not constant. Interest in using Austria-Hungary as a "Vermittler" surely existed, albeit alongside considerable skepticism. Moreover, their prospects of victory looked better with the addition of American forces. Sterling Kernek, in an article assessing Entente responses to the Wilsonian peace note of December 1916, writes that the French did not even push Germany to delineate its terms for peace, lest they should have the chance to fulfill them; the British did not want to appear as warmongers to the Americans, and scare away a potential ally.³⁰⁰ Lloyd George, according to Kernek, intended to simultaneously avoid peace negotiations while appearing open to the possibility of peace.³⁰¹ His speech to the War Cabinet in December 1916 in response to the Central Powers peace attempt framed the war as a moral struggle and a defensive war against an indiscriminate aggressor; Prussia, a "bad neighbour" who had "plunged Europe into a vortex of blood" could only be tamed by a decisive defeat.³⁰² Though Lloyd George displays a certain interest in a separate peace with Austria-Hungary, it is only insofar as it can serve his main goal and his ambivalence reflects the ambiguity between defeat through diplomacy or through military superiority. From his War Cabinet speech, which ends with the words "we shall put our trust in an unbroken Army rather than in a broken faith,"³⁰³ the latter wins out.

Steglich traces the root of the problem to the documents created on the 16th of February 1917, which he considers contradictory. The peace negotiations detailed here seem to suggest the basis for a general peace, yet the form in which these were presented only allowed for an

²⁹⁹ Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern 22.3.1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April / Karton 57.

³⁰⁰ Sterling Kernek, The British Government's Reactions to President Wilson's 'Peace' Note of December 1916. In: The Historical Journal, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Dec., 1970) 721-766 here 732.

³⁰¹ Kernek, The British Government's Reactions, 732.

³⁰² Speech of Premier Lloyd George on the German Proposals in the House of Commons, 19. 12. 1916. In: James Brown Scott (Hg.), Official Statements of War Aims and Peace Proposals: December 1916-November 1918 (Washington 1921) 16-21, here 20.

³⁰³ Quoted from Kernek, The British Government's Reactions, 733-734.

Austro-Hungarian separate peace.³⁰⁴ *Austria's Peace Offer* does not make the case for a Habsburg-mediated general peace. In this, Sixtus' own account of the proceedings, he takes pains to emphasize one point: that Germany must be defeated. Negotiations are "mere preliminaries to the defeat of Germany after Austria has been detached from her side. The war against Germany must go on until she was beaten."³⁰⁵ From *Austria's Peace Offer*, one could surmise that whatever differences of opinion Sixtus and the Kaiser may have held, Sixtus presented an unambiguous offer for a separate peace. Karl, whose endorsement of the proceedings was necessary, still held out hopes for the possibility of a general peace, perhaps by way of a separate one. By dint of Sixtus' insistence, Karl, at least according to his brother-in-law, recognized that a separate peace was by far the more viable option.

In consultation with the Kaiser, the princes Xaver and Sixtus, in Sixtus' account, spoke disparagingly of the Germans, who "were behaving like the most degraded of savages."³⁰⁶ Sixtus quotes Karl as saying that "he had tried every line of argument with them, but that the thought of peace simply did not exist in the High Places in Germany, where the dogma of a *Siegfriede*, or complete victory was still accepted with unquestioning faith."³⁰⁷ While Germany itself was intractable, the Austro-Hungarian Kaiser could not openly betray his ally. Sixtus and Manteyer write that Karl "felt himself bound as an ally to attempt the impossible and induce the Germans to agree to peace on just and equitable terms."³⁰⁸ Only should this fail, which apparently was a foregone conclusion, would Karl agree to a separate peace.³⁰⁹ Strangely, Sixtus details Karl's plan as avoiding contact with the Germans until absolutely sure they would accept the peace agreed to by Austria and the Entente;³¹⁰ it is difficult to see here how and when Germany was to be informed of Austrian plans, and what plans these would be. In any case, Karl hoped to come to an understanding with France, and subsequently with the rest of the Entente. Then, the combined forces of the Entente and Austria-Hungary would be able to push Germany to peace.

³⁰⁴ Steglich, *Die Friedenspolitik der Mittelmächte 1917/1918*, Bd. 1, 17.

³⁰⁵ Manteyer, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 59.

³⁰⁶ Manteyer, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 73.

³⁰⁷ Manteyer, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 73.

³⁰⁸ Manteyer, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 74.

³⁰⁹ Manteyer, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 74.

³¹⁰ Manteyer, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 74.

The Austro-Hungarian Kaiser's meeting with Kaiser Wilhelm II in Homburg occurred at the same time as the American Congress agreed to declare war on Germany. Sixtus claims Karl did his utmost to convince the German Kaiser that concluding a peace was necessary before yet more countries joined the Entente cause against them.³¹¹ The stumbling block here was yet again Alsace-Lorraine, which Karl deemed essential to peace with France, and offered to compensate Germany for the sacrifice with "all those parts of Poland and Galicia which were at his disposal."³¹² Sixtus describes the meeting as follows: "This attempt by the Emperor Charles to move his Ally was the last made by a loyal and honorable man, before being impelled, by the evident interest of his subjects, to negotiate openly for a separate Peace with the Entente. It need hardly be said that no one in Homburg paid him the least attention. Germany was still blinded and deafened by her pride."³¹³ Even taking Sixtus' own bias against a general peace into account, Karl's "Vermittler" intentions seemed destined to founder, if not on German determination for a "Siegfrieden," then on Austria-Hungary's comparative ineffectuality.

Presentation to the French Government

The Baron von Musulin was made aware at the beginning of March of French intentions to get closer to the Habsburgs, presumably with the goal of using them to exert pressure on Germany.³¹⁴ On March 12th, the daily report from the Foreign Ministry shows promise: not only was Austria-Hungary receiving favorable missives from France, but that there was French support for the idea of using the empire to mediate a general peace.³¹⁵ Stevenson

³¹¹ Manteyer, Austria's Peace Offer, 108.

³¹² Manteyer, Austria's Peace Offer, 108. This is likely in response to Czernin's efforts on the issue of Congress Poland, which he at first attempted to secure for Austria-Hungary, and then at the same time as the Sixtus negotiations, began to explore using it to bribe Germany, possibly into concluding peace. For more information on Congress Poland, see *Shanafelt*, *The Secret Enemy*, 124, 127-128.

³¹³ Manteyer, Austria's Peace Offer, 109.

³¹⁴ *Steglich*, *Die Friedenspolitik der Mittelmächte 1917/1918*, Bd. 1, 22f.

³¹⁵ „Der k. u. k. Gesandte in Bern erfährt von verschiedenen Seiten, dass sich in Frankreich in der letzten Zeit die Stimmung gegenüber der Monarchie sehr gebessert habe, und soll man aus jetzt angeblich eine Mittlerrolle zudenken. Auch der französische Militär Attaché in der Schweiz habe sich in diesem Sinne geäußert. Desgleichen erzählt Graf Rostworowski dem k. u. k. Gesandten er habe diesen Tage mit dem französischen Pressman Herr Haguinin gesprochen, der dem gesagt hatte, er frage sich ob nicht Österreich-Ungarn die Rolle eines Vermittlers zwischen Frankreich und Deutschland übernehmen könnte nur auf diesem Wege schließlich zu einen Kompromissfrieden zu kommen.“ Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern, 12. 3. 1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April / Karton 57.

identifies a dichotomy in French foreign relations. While France presented to its war-weary public the goal of crushing Austria-Hungary and dismembering it along linguistic-ethnic lines, they had privately entertained the possibility of preserving and even strengthening the Habsburg empire in order to create a French ally in the region against Germany.³¹⁶

The diplomat Philippe Berthelot had, in the Entente reply to President Wilson's peace initiative in December of 1916, pushed to include the liberation of the Czechoslovaks from Austrian domination.³¹⁷ A Habsburg empire without Czechoslovakia would be reduced to Germans and Magyars; the temptation for the Austrian Germans to unify with Germany itself would have been too great.³¹⁸ This decision by Berthelot, according to Stevenson, was not made in ignorance of the possible aforementioned scenario and signifies a "writing off" of Austria-Hungary should the Entente win the war. This demonstrates that French hopes for obtaining geostrategic advantages from Austria-Hungary were hardly universal. Stevenson divides French officials into two camps: the one, represented by Poincare, the ambassador Maurice Paléologue, and Jules Cambon, believing that Austria-Hungary could be separated from Germany and used as its counterbalance in Central Europe; the other, to which Berthelot probably belongs, doubting that the Habsburgs could ever be more than a Hohenzollern puppet used to exercise German dominance over southeastern Europe.³¹⁹

Poincare and Briand – France's "Old Guard"

On the 5th of March, Sixtus presented first Czernin's note, then the Kaiser's secret addendum to the French President.³²⁰ Upon hearing Czernin's note, Poincare responded "[t]his note is wholly inadequate. It cannot even serve as a minimum; nor could I possibly show it to our Allies."³²¹ His take on Karl's addendum was more favorable; Sixtus records him as saying it "does provide some basis for negotiation, which is entirely lacking from the open note," and that he would make arrangements to inform the King of England, Lloyd George, and the Tsar at once.³²² After speaking with Sixtus, Poincare detailed a plan of action. The Kaiser was to

³¹⁶ Stevenson, *French War Aims Against Germany*, 59.

³¹⁷ Stevenson, *French War Aims Against Germany*, 57.

³¹⁸ Stevenson, *French War Aims Against Germany*, 57.

³¹⁹ Stevenson, *French War Aims Against Germany*, 58.

³²⁰ Manteyer, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 57.

³²¹ Manteyer, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 57.

³²² Manteyer, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 58.

formally endorse Sixtus' four points, upon which Poincare would inform the English and Russian governments and attempt to conclude a "secret armistice."³²³ He reiterated that England and France had no original altercation with Austria-Hungary, moreover, "[i]t is in France's interest not merely to keep Austria as she is, but to enlarge her frontiers at Germany's expense by taking in Silesia or Bavaria."³²⁴ Germany, he claimed, is incorrigible.³²⁵ The third interview between Sixtus and Poincare again pointed in the direction of a separate peace aiming, in Poincare's words, at the destruction of the Central Powers, after which Austria would "take her place, in diplomacy, by our side."³²⁶

Poincare informed Briand of the Sixtus mission on March 8th. Up until this point in the war, Briand resisted any sort of neutral mediation or approaches from the enemy.³²⁷ Stevenson however asserts that Briand was by nature open to compromise, and would not outright oppose contact with the Germans.³²⁸ Though the general tide in France indicated that a decisive victory over Germany was needed, Briand appeared more willing than most to negotiate a compromise. Due to French entanglements, Briand was reticent to get closer to the Habsburgs in February of 1917, should this endanger the Franco-Russian alliance.³²⁹ Yet as of the Sixtus peace attempts, he had already established a connection to the Habsburgs through the Duchess of d'Uzès.³³⁰ Briand agreed with the French president that Sixtus' note was completely inadequate, but that Karl's explanatory addendum "contained the nucleus of a formal proposal."³³¹ However, it is not clear from the context whether this proposal is for an Austrian separate peace or if Briand saw in it the potential for a general one.

Sixtus reiterates in *Austria's Peace Offer* the precondition of Austrian ratification of the four points in order to proceed with informing the rest of the Entente and agreeing to an armistice. Also important was the need to dissuade the Austro-Hungarian Kaiser from going through with plans for an offensive against Italy; this would stymie efforts to conclude peace. The

³²³ Manteyer, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 59.

³²⁴ Manteyer, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 59.

³²⁵ Manteyer, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 59.

³²⁶ Manteyer, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 89.

³²⁷ Stevenson, *French War Aims Against Germany*, 56.

³²⁸ Stevenson, *French War Aims Against Germany*, 57.

³²⁹ Stevenson, *French War Aims Against Germany*, 57.

³³⁰ Stevenson, *French War Aims Against Germany*, 58.

³³¹ Manteyer, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 62.

issues of Italy and Romania would be dealt with later, after the aforementioned steps had been taken.³³² France would thereby conclude peace with Austria-Hungary, and would compensate the empire with Silesia and Bavaria for sacrifices made to Italy and Romania.³³³ “Such a peace must cut off Austria from Germany, who would persist in her insensate hostility and must be fought to a finish.”³³⁴ The reception of Sixtus’ ideas by the French president Poincare and Prime Minister Briand was encouraging, yet in private, the French statesmen admitted to having considerable doubts.³³⁵ These doubts concerned of Austro-Hungarian powerlessness to achieve what it proposed, particularly in the case of Alsace-Lorraine.³³⁶ From this, one might assume that Poincare took the propositions literally, that he saw them as an actual policy suggestion, rather than as an attempt to open general discussions. Polzer-Hoditz attributes the initial tepid reception of the Sixtus Brief at the beginning of March to Italy, or more specifically, to French territorial guarantees to Italy.³³⁷

Stumbling Blocks: Alsace-Lorraine and Italy

Poincare and Cambon informed Sixtus that France was committed to the restoration of Alsace-Lorraine along its 1814 border, and offered the possibility of gaining German Silesia or even Bavaria for Austria.³³⁸ Austrian territorial gains would, as eventually made clear, be compensation for land ceded to the Italians in order to remove the Italian obstruction to an Austrian separate peace with the Entente. Poincare claimed to trust the King of Italy as well as Foreign Minister Sidney Sonnino, yet he feared Italy might cause trouble by “playing into Germany’s hands.”³³⁹ For him, Italy constituted the main stumbling block and he insisted on consultations with the Italians before proceeding with Austria. Sixtus’ opinion on Italy varies, but he appeared to recognize the necessity of compromise in order to attain his ultimate goal. He reserved his moral condemnation for Germany, which, in his opinion, was

³³² Manteyer, Austria’s Peace Offer, 61.

³³³ Manteyer, Austria’s Peace Offer, 61f.

³³⁴ Manteyer, Austria’s Peace Offer, 62.

³³⁵ Steglich, Die Friedenspolitik der Mittelmächte 1917/1918, Bd. 1, 21.

³³⁶ Poincare wrote in his diary on May 8th, „Comment l’Autriche pourra-t-elle se passer du concours de l’Allemagne pour nous faire rendre l’Alsace et la Lorraine?“ Quoted from Steglich, Die Friedenspolitik der Mittelmächte 1917/1918, Bd. 1, 21.

³³⁷ Polzer-Hoditz, Kaiser Karl, 326.

³³⁸ Stevenson, French War Aims Against Germany, 58.

³³⁹ Manteyer, Austria’s Peace Offer, 59.

“keeping alive the Italian hatred and distrust of Austria.”³⁴⁰ Asserting that both the Italian and Austrian populaces want peace, he insisted they were kept inflamed and involved in the war by their politicians.³⁴¹

Scholarly opinions on the true significance of Alsace-Lorraine are divided. The general thrust of Steglich’s argument takes Czernin at his word: Alsace-Lorraine is the “key.” Whether the transfer of this territory actually had the power to bring about a ceasefire between France and Germany is moot – the Austro-Hungarian high command believed it did, and based their hope in resolving the war on the resolution of the territorial quandary, and perhaps more importantly the possibility of using Alsace-Lorraine as leverage.³⁴² Kann, on the other hand, throws the emphasis on Alsace-Lorraine into question, claiming it is militarily meaningless.³⁴³ He postulates that it might have served to “drive a wedge in the alliance”³⁴⁴ between Germany and Austria-Hungary, thus achieving the desired separation of Habsburg from Hohenzollern in the eyes of the Entente. Though there is ample reason to conclude from the daily reports of the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Ministry that the empire attempted to differentiate itself from Germany in its dealings with neutral states,³⁴⁵ Kann does not find evidence supporting the possibility of an attempt to use Alsace-Lorraine for this purpose in the primary sources.³⁴⁶ Kann’s assertion that Alsace-Lorraine was of little importance at this time speaks either to Austro-Hungarian obtuseness or supports the argument that the Sixtus Brief may have been intended as nothing more than an opening to negotiations.

If the territory was as unimportant as Kann believes, one would, for the sake of Austro-Hungarian credibility, hope that Steglich’s emphasis on Alsace-Lorraine as the “key” is not literal. Alsace-Lorraine, to the Habsburg high command, may have been the most likely token to demonstrate their readiness for peace, even if the territory itself was not of great military importance. Stevenson, on the French side, argues convincingly for Alsace-

³⁴⁰ Manteyer, *Austria’s Peace Offer*, 76.

³⁴¹ Manteyer, *Austria’s Peace Offer*, 76.

³⁴² Steglich, *Die Friedenspolitik der Mittelmächte 1917/1918*, Bd. 1, 19.

³⁴³ Kann, *Die Sixtusaffäre und die Geheimen Friedensverhandlungen Österreich-Ungarn*, 60.

³⁴⁴ Kann, *Die Sixtusaffäre und die Geheimen Friedensverhandlungen Österreich-Ungarn*, 60.

³⁴⁵ This is particularly evident leading up to Germany’s decision to resume unrestricted submarine warfare.

³⁴⁶ Kann, *Die Sixtusaffäre und die Geheimen Friedensverhandlungen Österreich-Ungarn*, 60.

Lorraine's value for the French war industry, and it seems evident that symbolic meaning and military meaning often went together. In any case, as Austria-Hungary had no jurisdiction over Alsace-Lorraine, its mention in the Sixtus Brief was for this reason intrinsically theoretical, and perhaps therefore even more indicative of symbolism and nationalist mythology.

Ribot, Regime Change, and Failure

Though Austro-Hungarian foreign policy did not consider Briand's replacement as Prime Minister to represent a system change, and reaffirmed that there existed, at least among the French, no hatred towards Austria-Hungary,³⁴⁷ Ribot, who took over on the 19th of March, 1917, was markedly less receptive to the Sixtus Brief. There was indeed little carryover from the previous regime. The Council of Ministers had not exercised much control over Briand's diplomatic initiatives; according to Stevenson's analysis, individual statesmen had disproportionate power in the French government.³⁴⁸ Stevenson likewise characterizes Ribot as fundamentally conservative in his war aims; he resisted changes to Entente war aims and hoped to stave off the collapse of Russia.³⁴⁹

At the end of March, when Sixtus presented Karl's letter to Poincare and Ribot, Polzer-Hoditz reports a positive reaction, particularly in regard to Alsace-Lorraine. He quotes Ribot as having shown the letter to Lloyd George, whose reaction was overwhelmingly in favor of peace on these terms.³⁵⁰ This agreement, presumably over Alsace-Lorraine, removed a technical blockade to peace agreements between the Western Powers and Austria-Hungary, though Polzer-Hoditz in this context neglects to mention unresolved Italian issues. He blames the eventual failure of the letter on Ribot, whose actions, in Polzer-Hoditz's words, were marked by distrust and hesitancy.³⁵¹ From Polzer-Hoditz's description, it appears as though Ribot, more than any other Entente politician, was unable to see beyond the implications for Italy in an Austro-Hungarian separate peace, and insisted on informing

³⁴⁷ Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern, 23. 3. 1917. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April / Karton 57.

³⁴⁸ Stevenson, *French War Aims Against Germany*, 59.

³⁴⁹ Stevenson, *French War Aims Against Germany*, 67.

³⁵⁰ Polzer-Hoditz, *Kaiser Karl*, 337.

³⁵¹ Polzer-Hoditz, *Kaiser Karl*, 337.

Sonnino, who would reassume the office of Foreign Minister later that spring, of the peace note.³⁵² The standpoint of Ribot, according to Polzer-Hoditz, “nahm der Friedensaktion alle Erfolgsaussichten.”³⁵³

Sixtus likewise places the brunt of the blame on Ribot, as well as on the Italian statesmen. His notes from April and June of 1917 detail decreasing French support for his plans and unsuccessful attempts by Lloyd George to obtain an audience with the Italian king and Sonnino. Whereas Lloyd George supported the idea of a separate peace with Austria based on Austrian cessions of some territory to Italy, Sonnino, according to Sixtus, wanted “all or nothing.”³⁵⁴ Ribot, moreover, supported the Italian foreign minister, and felt that the unlikelihood of Austria making such sacrifices made further negotiations on the subject futile.³⁵⁵ Whereas Sixtus writes merely that king of Italy and Sonnino failed to show up to planned discussions in London in May, Polzer-Hoditz takes a more drastic view. He places the blame entirely on Sonnino, writing that Sonnino had personally blocked the king from attending.³⁵⁶ Both Sixtus and Polzer-Hoditz emphasize Lloyd George’s readiness to help Austria and Italy reach an understanding, which would have led to a separate peace for the empire.

From Sixtus’ own account, his peace attempt foundered on an inability to solve the Italian question.³⁵⁷ Not only did the Italian statesmen refuse to cooperate or compromise on their principles, but Entente backing for his attempt rapidly diminished. Hinted at, though not stated directly, is a certain stubbornness on the part of Karl, who continually put off negotiations with Italy. Whether this is due to warmongering forces in his cabinet or to his adherence to popular opinion, Karl did not take the active and conciliatory role that Sixtus recommended. While both Polzer-Hoditz and Sixtus report on Italian attempts to negotiate with Austria-Hungary during April 1917, on the basis only of the Italian-speaking part of South Tyrol,³⁵⁸ Karl refused the offer. This is attributed to his reticence to negotiate

³⁵² *Polzer-Hoditz*, Kaiser Karl, 338.

³⁵³ *Polzer-Hoditz*, Kaiser Karl, 338.

³⁵⁴ *Manteyer*, Austria’s Peace Offer, 122.

³⁵⁵ *Manteyer*, Austria’s Peace Offer, 122f.

³⁵⁶ *Polzer-Hoditz*, Kaiser Karl, 355.

³⁵⁷ *Manteyer*, Austria’s Peace Offer, 124, 181-185.

³⁵⁸ *Polzer-Hoditz*, Kaiser Karl, 348.

separately with the Entente and with Italy at the same time.³⁵⁹ In essence, an unwinnable situation materialized. Karl was unwilling to negotiate with Italy before receiving Entente support, and Austrian territorial cessions to Italy were France and England's preconditions to backing Austria-Hungary in its bid for a separate peace.

Sixtus claimed that Karl seemed to wait for France and England to intervene and settle the Italian issue for him.³⁶⁰ The second autograph letter from Karl, sent on the 9th of May 1917, began with the following paragraph:

I note with satisfaction that France and England are in agreement with me upon what I hold to be the essential basis of a European Peace. At the same time they express their opposition to any form of Peace in which Italy does not participate. As it happens, Italy has just approached me with a demand for Peace between herself and the Monarchy, in which she abandons all the inadmissible claims of annexation which she has hitherto maintained in regard to the Slavonic States on the Adriatic. She has limited her claim to the Italian-speaking portion of the Tyrol. I myself have postponed the examination of her demands until I hear from you what answer France and England may make to my offer of Peace.³⁶¹

In light of the front's popularity for the monarchy's citizens, it is understandable that Karl would want to offload responsibility for a truce to the Western powers. A peace with Italy needed to be part of a peace with the rest of the Entente. Sixtus also includes evidence that the Kaiser still held out hope for a general peace. Karl, in a message to his brother-in-law, detailed a hypothetical chain of events that would result from an armistice between Austria and the Entente, and mushroom into a general peace by shutting down the war on all of its fronts.³⁶² Polzer-Hoditz records the second letter from Karl to the French government as going unanswered,³⁶³ effectively putting an end to the peace efforts.

³⁵⁹ *Polzer-Hoditz*, *Kaiser Karl*, 348.

³⁶⁰ *Manteyer*, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 138.

³⁶¹ *Manteyer*, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 145.

³⁶² *Manteyer*, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 132f.

³⁶³ *Polzer-Hoditz*, *Kaiser Karl*, 354.

A VALID PEACE ATTEMPT?

That the Sixtus peace attempts of 1917 did not meet with any degree of success is historical fact. This abject failure to change the course of the war is often used to imply that the peace effort itself was flawed; that had it offered more realistic terms of negotiation, it may have ended the conflict, or at the very least, led to a separate peace for Austria-Hungary. But does the fault lie with the Sixtus peace attempts themselves? Were the peace terms indeed so improbable as to be useless? Or did Sixtus' endeavor have as good a chance as any other peace attempt? Was it a factor of timing, then, that doomed the attempt? What went into the decision to craft a peace missive in this fashion and how was it intended to work? Perhaps these questions can be generalized into an issue of placing the blame, namely, whether the Sixtus mission failed due to internal or external factors, or a combination of both.

The Sixtus peace overture was far from the only attempt to end the war. Robert Kann asserts that the attempt itself was not unique; what made it significant was the ensuing scandal in the summer of 1918, which had significant impact on the war and on Austro-German relations.³⁶⁴ Among historians, he is not alone in his assessments. It is in any case difficult to separate out this secondary significance from the peace attempts themselves. This thesis argues that it is significant, moreover it was significant at the time. It involved the Austro-Hungarian Kaiser, it made use of direct dynastic diplomacy, and most of all, it set out to establish a radical new place for Austria-Hungary in a postwar world order. This degree of innovation is perhaps the most striking aspect of the Sixtus peace attempts – it completely reimagined Austria-Hungary in Europe, positioning it in a radically different configuration between the Scylla and Charybdis of the western Entente powers and the German Empire. Karl is, as suggested by John Boyer in his book *Culture and Political Crisis in Vienna: Christian Socialism in Power, 1897 – 1918*, creating a new notion of the political configuration of Central Europe, one that differs significantly from the older German concept of *Mitteleuropa*.³⁶⁵ If nothing else, Karl's actions are a window into the Habsburg psyche when under extreme duress, and the fragility of the “unbreakable” alliance with Germany.

³⁶⁴ Kann, *A History of the Habsburg Empire*, 476.

³⁶⁵ Boyer, *Culture and Political Crisis in Vienna*, 406.

Through the direct involvement of Karl as well as Sixtus' own station, the Sixtus peace attempt is often described as dynastic diplomacy. Whether that in and of itself invalidates the attempt relies heavily on two assumptions: a) that dynastic diplomacy was by 1917 an outdated form of diplomacy and b) that the Habsburg dynasty itself was irrelevant. Both of these assumptions can only be made with the benefit of hindsight, and serve at best as partial explanations. The imminently subjective answers to the aforementioned questions have ignited significant debate in the academic community. For the purposes of analyzing the validity of the Sixtus peace attempts, the credibility of the empire itself is brought into question. Whether the Habsburgs and their empire were outdated by the time the war broke out, or had any reasonable chance of existence in a postwar world, is the overarching question for which the Sixtus peace negotiations and subsequent affair can only provide evidence.

In this chapter, the Sixtus Brief will be analyzed and contextualized within wider theoretical concerns. As the attempt met with failure, the reasons for this failure will be addressed. These reasons, naturally, involve a certain amount of speculation, if not for their ultimate decisiveness, for their relative weight in Sixtus' inability to bring about peace. The chapter will start with specific and personal reasons as to why the Brief was unworkable, and then will move to system-wide barriers to this specific peace, or to peace in general. The wider analysis will then lead back to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter – was the Sixtus Brief a valid peace attempt? And if so, why did it fail?

Were the Sixtus Peace Attempts Anachronistic?

It is often suggested that the Sixtus peace attempts failed because they used outdated methods, namely dynastic channels to produce a foreign policy outcome when the world was changing and open diplomacy was pushing traditional dynastic or closed diplomacy out of favor. Indeed, the letters were first and foremost an attempt to open negotiations based on dynastic ties, namely those of the two princes and the Austrian Empress Zita to the French royal house of Bourbon as members of its Italian cadet branch, Bourbon-Parma. While there is certainly evidence for this observation, such an argument makes heavy use of the clarity brought by hindsight. As of 1917, there had been no caesura to mark the end of “dynastic

diplomacy.”³⁶⁶ There had not even been a clear caesura to mark the end of Austria-Hungary as a Great Power.³⁶⁷

By this token, it is too simple to suggest that the failure of the Sixtus Brief resulted from anachronistic politics. The Sixtus Brief and peace mission, though it ended up being the last gasp of European dynastic power politics, was not the clumsy flailing of a dying empire. To pigeonhole it as the “end of dynastic diplomacy” fails first of all to recognize the continued relevance of the *ancien regime*³⁶⁸ and second of all, it undermines whatever potential the mission may have had for success. Sixtus instigated a legitimate peace attempt that failed, as did many, many others. The Habsburg emperor wanted to use his influence and power to bring about a start to peace negotiations, but such actions were no longer possible by 1917. But was it no longer possible because he and his empire were viewed as old fashioned and impotent, or because the nations with which he was negotiating did not want peace in the first place? From Entente reactions to previous peace feelers, it seems that Karl's status as a royal and his use of family ties are in fact somewhat irrelevant. Where these factors gain relevance and start to present an interesting picture of the situation as a whole is with the actual Sixtus Affair in the spring of 1918, and its domestic and foreign fallout. At the same time, it is worth remembering that the Sixtus negotiations were in essence dynastic diplomacy presented to a republican audience. As such, the question of whether or not dynastic diplomacy was indeed outdated is relevant. Robert Kann, in his essay “Dynastic

³⁶⁶ Mayer argues for the continued power of the ruling elites up to and during the First World War; the war, furthermore, was started and controlled by the elites to advance their own interests. Not only, in his words, was “the cult of war” “an elite, not a plebian, affair,” Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime*, 306, but this class actively pushed to resolve their differences with force. Mayer admits to Marxist leanings at the start of his book, and uses language connoting a class conflict; this does not serve to diminish his argument that the war was in a sense a fight for relevance in a changing, “modernizing” world. “Under the aegis of the scepter and the miter, the old elites, unrestrained by the bourgeoisie, systematically prepared their drive for retrogression, to be executed with what they considered irresistible armies. They, the horsemen of the apocalypse, were ready to crash into the past not only with swords and cavalry charges but also with the artillery and railroads of the modern world that besieged them.” Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime*, 323f.

³⁶⁷ Though again, with the use of hindsight, one can with some accuracy trace the decline of the empire during the war and its growing dependence on Germany. As with any historical analysis, it is difficult to pinpoint when the Austro-Hungarians (politicians, military, citizenry) themselves realized they were losing clout in the world and control over the empire itself, and on what level this self-awareness took place.

³⁶⁸ The relevance of Austria-Hungary in the 20th century will be touched on later in this chapter. It is the opinion of the author that while Austria-Hungary had in many ways been outstripped by other Great Powers at the time the war broke out, it was far from the moribund construct it is often made out to be. This thesis to some extent rests on the assumption that Austria-Hungary had a chance at survival in the postwar world, and was as of 1917 actively working towards this.

Relations and European Power Politics (1848-1918),” explores the importance of Europe’s royalty as the twentieth century dawned, and comes to the conclusion that rulers were losing relevance as politicians. More specifically, Kann claims that the tight personal network that bound European royalty by blood had declining influence on the foreign policies of their respective nations.³⁶⁹ Sovereigns became more representative of their countries and were therefore increasingly unable to transcend national boundaries to enact political change.³⁷⁰ While it is not the intention of this thesis to explore the concept of metonymy as applied to heads of state at this point in European history,³⁷¹ Karl’s personal forays into diplomacy are somewhat atypical and their failure supports the assertion that the sovereign was no longer the ideal person to control state policy.

Were Entente Politicians Not Ready to End the War?

If Entente opinions on the subject of Austria-Hungary were in a state of flux, it could well be attributed to general changes in the war situation. These have been discussed at length, and for this reason we will review the personal aims of the decision-makers involved. The “sea-change” of 1917 was in part the result of ministerial changes. David Lloyd George and Ottokar Czernin assumed office in their respective lands in December of 1916; Aristide Briand would lose his office in March 1917. Woodrow Wilson, though officially still neutral, fought for reelection in 1916 on a platform that emphasized continued isolation, though he warned of the possibility of involvement in the European war.³⁷² Within an atmosphere of political turmoil, it might be possible to interpret the Sixtus Brief as a missive directed at one set of politicians, but that met instead with their successors.

Paul W. Schroeder makes a compelling, if somewhat one-sided case for England’s responsibility for Austria-Hungary in an essay entitled “World War I as Galloping Gertie: A

³⁶⁹ Robert A. Kann, *Dynastic Relations and European Power Politics (1848-1918)*. In: *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (Sep., 1973) 387-410, here 407f.

³⁷⁰ Kann, *Dynastic relations and European Power Politics*, 407-409.

³⁷¹ An example of the sovereign-empire metonymy which comes to mind is Kaiser Franz-Joseph’s initial framing of the assassination at Sarajevo as a personal attack.

³⁷² J. A. Thompson, in his essay on Wilson’s role in the war, indicates that Wilson himself did not believe in the possibility of sustained neutrality, however the concept was popular with voters. J. A. Thompson, *Woodrow Wilson and World War I. A Reappraisal*. In: *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Dec., 1985) 325-348, here 336.

Reply to Joachim Remak.” Though Schroeder establishes a contest for control over the European system between Great Britain and Germany, he demonstrates that it was Austria, rather than Germany, that found itself encircled by the Entente on the eve of war.³⁷³

Underpinning his analysis is the implicit assumption that while Germany focused on domination of Europe, Great Britain’s interests were more global in scope, and perhaps thereby precluding an accurate assessment of the situation in Central Europe. Schroeder ultimately presents the situation from an English point of view, which, while it conveys little as to the actual internal state of Austria-Hungary, is important for a discussion of the Sixtus Brief – Lloyd George was, after all, one of the prince’s most receptive audiences.

Schroeder’s essential question, namely, if Britain should have taken more responsibility for Austria-Hungary in order to maintain the European balance of power and thus prevent war, is ultimately a question of Austria-Hungary’s importance in the international system. This importance, or lack thereof, was a double-edged sword for the further existence of the Dual Monarchy construct. An important or powerful actor on the continent would be treated with appropriate seriousness, and would be courted or opposed in earnest. Austria-Hungary’s importance in the eyes of the British, according to Schroeder, was on the decline, and as such, Britain ignored and even undermined Austrian interests.³⁷⁴ While Schroeder claims it is possible to argue that British foreign policy was “more anti-Austrian than anti-German,”³⁷⁵ this assessment is not only harsh, but attributes more attention to Austria-Hungary than seems to have been given. The real problem is not malice, but negligence, and here the argument reverts to one concerning the importance or even indispensability of Austria-Hungary to the European balance of power as a whole.

Sixtus’ plan for a separate peace, interestingly enough, appears to rest on the presumption of Austria-Hungary’s unimportance. He had hoped to endear the empire to French and British Entente politicians precisely because they could hardly have had strong feelings either way for the fate of the Habsburgs. Accounting for this rather “pessimistic positive” is difficult, not in the least because it is first and foremost an admission of weakness. Bethmann-Hollweg and Burian’s great concern in the fall of 1916 that a peace attempt might be taken as

³⁷³ *Schroeder, World War I as Galloping Gertie*, 149.

³⁷⁴ *Schroeder, World War I as Galloping Gertie*, 152.

³⁷⁵ *Schroeder, World War I as Galloping Gertie*, 151.

such³⁷⁶ and thereby initiate even harder fighting on the part of the enemy was still valid. The importance and military strength of Austria-Hungary posed considerable dilemmas for Sixtus. The Austro-Hungarian Kaiser, in his desire to mediate a general peace, asked for the impossible from his brother-in-law – to convey enough vigor on the part of the monarchy to mediate a general peace among the Great Powers while also indicating that they were too weak to continue to fight. In examining the shifting perceptions of Austria-Hungary by the Entente, a possible reason for Sixtus choosing to present a separate peace emerges. It was an unambiguous admission of Austro-Hungarian inability to continue to influence the course of events in Europe, and for this reason to step aside.

Conflicting Statements and Lack of Unity on the Part of Austria-Hungary

By participating in the Sixtus peace attempts, the Kaiser showed his willingness to play both sides. This attempt to keep all options open for as long as possible may have itself contributed to Sixtus' failure. Was then a lack of conviction, or of consensus, a contributing factor? Were Entente politicians receiving mixed messages as to Austro-Hungarian foreign policy aims and simply erred on the side of caution in refusing Sixtus' offer? As discussed in the previous chapter, the wording of the Sixtus note itself left room for interpretation as to whether a separate or general peace was the ultimate intention. As events would show, there was minimal agreement on the subject even among the originators of the Brief in Austria-Hungary.

It was no secret that the changing of the guard at the end of 1916 among Austro-Hungarian decision-makers was intended to signify an end to the empire's participation in the war. Yet although the new Kaiser and his newly-appointed Foreign Minister Czernin both tasked themselves with finding a way out, they did not seem to work in harmony. Shanafelt

³⁷⁶ „Der Gefahr, dass unser Angebot als ein Zeichen der Schwäche angesehen werden kann, sind wir meines Erachtens umso weniger ausgesetzt, wenn wir vorher die Proklamation für Polen erlassen und der Welt damit zeigen, dass wir uns als Sieger betrachten. Eine gewisse Frist wird zwischen Proklamation und Angebot allerdings verstreichen müssen.“ 4058/908454-8 908461 No.357 Bethmann-Hollweg à l'Ambassade de Vienne, Télégramme. Pièce jointe, 1. 11. 1916. In: André Scherer, Jacques Grunewald, *L'Allemagne et les Problèmes de la Paix. Pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale*, Bd. 1. (Paris 1962) 536-538, here 537. Further elaboration on this point is given in a note from Bethmann-Hollweg in which he emphasizes the need to work fast in expressing their willingness for peace talks, lest they miss the “psychological moment.” 4058/908462-5 N° 358 Bethmann-Hollweg à l'Ambassade à Vienne, 1. 11. 1916. In: André Scherer, Jacques Grunewald, *L'Allemagne et les Problèmes de la Paix. Pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale*, Bd. 1. (Paris 1962) 538f, here 538f.

emphasizes Czernin's intentions to extricate Austria-Hungary from the war, as well as the fundamental similarities between the aims of the Kaiser and Foreign Minister.³⁷⁷ Both were interested primarily (in Czernin's case solely) in a general peace, in which Austria-Hungary played the role of the mediator. Assuming this responsibility would have the side effect of preserving Habsburg authority on the European stage. Czernin worked towards this goal, and sought to position the empire between the warring camps of the Entente and Germany. This is reflected in his own peace proposals, which went out at roughly the same time as those of Sixtus.³⁷⁸

The Richtlinien für Mensdorff were given orally by Czernin to the diplomat, Count Albert von Mensdorff on February 14th, 1917.³⁷⁹ Unlike the Sixtus peace attempts, the Richtlinien³⁸⁰ made use of official channels and the diplomat's journeys are well documented

³⁷⁷ *Shanafelt*, *The Secret Enemy*, 122.

³⁷⁸ The degree to which Czernin himself was involved in the Sixtus attempt is unknown. He almost certainly knew of its existence; whether he was aware of the specifics is unclear. In any case, he had his own ideas for a postwar world order, and formulated his own suggestions for ending the war, which were presented at the same time as the secret Sixtus negotiations. If indeed he was aware of the exact terms of the Sixtus note, the difference between them and his own proposals is remarkable. Had he been kept informed of the Sixtus proceedings, it cannot be established to what extent he agreed with them or was able to influence them. During the Sixtus Affair the following year, Czernin denied all knowledge or involvement in the peace attempt, shifting the blame directly onto Karl.

³⁷⁹ *Steglich*, *Die Friedenspolitik der Mittelmächte 1917/1918*, Bd. 1, 19.

³⁸⁰ The Richtlinien given to Mensdorff were as follows:

1. Ausdrücklichste Betonung der Unerschütterlichkeit unserer Bündnisse, die absolute Unmöglichkeit, uns jemals von Deutschland zu trennen, mit besonderer Betonung, dass wir auch den U-Bootkrieg gleich Deutschland bis zum äußersten durchführen werden.
 2. Unsere absolute Siegeszuversicht, die sich auf die militärische und wirtschaftliche Lage stützt (mit Erwähnung Rumäniens).
 3. Betonung des Umstandes, dass das Recht auf unserer Seite ist: Wir sind bereit, einen Vermittlungsfrieden ohne Eroberung zu schließen; da die Entente nicht darauf eingeht, so fällt die Verantwortung für das weitere Blutvergiessen voll und ganz auf dieselbe.
 4. Dabei wollen Euer Exzellenz von sich aus andeuten, dass der genaue status quo ante aus naheliegenden Gründen unmöglich ist (Polen) und Grenzrectifikationen von Seite unserer Feinde wie von unserer unerlässlich scheinen; dabei wollen Euer Exzellenz als Ihre Idee andeuten, dass wir wohl nichts dagegen hätten, wenn sich die Russen die Moldau nehmen würden.
 5. Über die Vorgeschichte des Krieges und die Anfangsstadien wollen sich Euer Exzellenz am besten nicht verbreiten, mit Hinweis darauf, dass Gespräche hierüber keinen praktischen Wert mehr haben; sollte ein solches Thema unvermeidlich sein, so wäre auf die serbischen Umtriebe, den Mord von Sarajewo und unsere Notwehr hinzuweisen, ferner darauf, dass Belgien durch seine Haltung Deutschland gezwungen hat, in der bekannten Weise vorzugehen.
 6. Besonders England gegenüber wäre immer wieder zu betonen, dass wir und Deutschland ein unzertrennbares Ganzes bilden und dass in den großen wie den kleinen Fragen die vollste Harmonie zwischen Wien und Berlin besteht.
 7. Euer Exzellenz wollen dabei besonders hervorgeben, dass Seine Majestät der Kaiser Karl und meine Wenigkeit obige Grundsätze zu ihrem politischen Glaubensbekenntnis zählen.
- Quoted from *Steglich*, *Die Friedenspolitik der Mittelmächte 1917/1918*, Bd. 1, 20.

in ministerial archives. Mensdorff himself was repeatedly sent to Sweden and Norway in order to assess the situation of these neutrals for whom the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare between Great Britain and the German Empire was of utmost concern.³⁸¹ The Mensdorff peace attempts could be seen as a response to the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare and the implications of this development for the British war effort. Here, Czernin attempted to defuse the conflict between Great Britain and the German Empire by crafting a common enemy out of France.

With their generalized and moralistic arguments, the Richtlinien might well be understood as a direct response to the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare between Great Britain and Germany, and the effect of this development on neutral maritime economies. The Richtlinien, far from straightforward, set a course of complicated maneuvers for the Monarchy within the parameters of the European alliance system. They attempted to drive a wedge in the Entente,³⁸² while preserving the alliance between Austria-Hungary and Germany. Czernin is unambiguous in his declaration of solidarity with Germany, yet in his next point, he emphasizes readiness to conclude a peace without victory, directly contradicting oft-stated German plans. Early on, the Richtlinien contradicts itself; it asserts absolute confidence in victory while proclaiming readiness to conclude a peace without conquering the enemy.³⁸³ In light of these contradictions, it is difficult to imagine a suitable audience for the Richtlinien; they make no concessions to France or England, and give neutral powers little to work with. Unlike the Sixtus Brief, the Richtlinien do not appear to have been formulated to serve as the basis for discussion. Czernin uses moralistic arguments to support policy decisions, such as in the third point, where he emphasizes “dass das Recht auf unserer Seite ist,”³⁸⁴ a statement which could hardly merit consideration by the Entente.

³⁸¹ Mensdorff's visits to Scandinavian countries appear often in the records of the Foreign Ministry. One which details his positive reception in Sweden is found in Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern 2.3.1917 Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April / Karton 57.

³⁸² „Es könnte dann vielleicht sogar versucht werden, einen Kontinentalfrieden mit Ausschluss von England in's Auge zu fassen.“ An alliance with France against England was also suggested; it appears as though Austria-Hungary was at this time weighing the options of an alliance with one but not both western Entente powers. Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern 2.3.1917 Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äussern / 1916 Dezember – 1917 April / Karton 57

³⁸³ *Steglich*, Die Friedenspolitik der Mittelmächte 1917/1918, Bd. 1, 20.

³⁸⁴ *Steglich*, Die Friedenspolitik der Mittelmächte 1917/1918, Bd. 1, 20.

Ultimately, the Richtlinien did little more than to echo of the December 12th peace note of 1916, and they never grew into a serious peace attempt.³⁸⁵ Moreover, they serve as an example of the widely differing views held by Austro-Hungarian decision-makers; the desperation to get out of the war and lack of a consensus on how to do it.

The Italian Question

As Italy weighed the advantages and disadvantages of engagement on each side early in the war, German diplomats strongly urged Austria-Hungary to make the necessary concessions in order to prevent an Italian front from opening up. Even as late as December 1915, after Italy had already been promised extensive spoils from the Entente in April of that year in the secret Treaty of London, Hindenburg himself pushed the Habsburgs to make the necessary territorial concessions to keep Italy out of the war.³⁸⁶ Evidently, Germany had underestimated the degree to which Austria *wanted* to be at war with Italy, as it is difficult to explain the enthusiasm with which the k. u. k. Armee fought on this front in any other manner.³⁸⁷ Perhaps the most salient issue is that of Karl's failure to make peace with Italy, or more specifically, his dismissal of Italian efforts to make peace with him in the spring of 1917.

Polzer-Hoditz places the blame for the failure of the Sixtus peace attempts on an inability to solve the Italian question.³⁸⁸ That the issue could not be surmounted is attributed to actors on both sides of the conflict, Ribot and Czernin above all. Polzer-Hoditz describes a conversation between Czernin and Sixtus in which Czernin argues that Austria cannot offer any territorial concessions to Italy until the Entente has guaranteed the Monarchy its territorial integrity.³⁸⁹ Italy proved in many ways to be Austria-Hungary's most dangerous opponent, presenting both domestic and international problems, all targeting the monarchy's territorial integrity. Why then, did Austria-Hungary attempt to start peace negotiations

³⁸⁵ *Steglich*, Die Friedenspolitik der Mittelmächte 1917/1918, Bd. 1, 21.

³⁸⁶ Geheim-Telegramm in Ziffern an Gottfried Prinzen zu Hohenlohe in Berlin, Nr. 801., 11. 12. 1915. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv I, Geheimakten, Krieg 1914-1918/ Liasse XLVII/5 b-g/ Karton 511.

³⁸⁷ Lothar Höbelt, Former Masters Playing Second Fiddle. Austria-Hungary in World War I and Britain in World War II. In: Emil Brix, Klaus Koch, Elisabeth Vyslonzil (Hg.), *The Decline of Empires* (München/Wien 2001) 119-126, here 123.

³⁸⁸ *Polzer-Hoditz*, Kaiser Karl, 329, 354f.

³⁸⁹ *Polzer-Hoditz*, Kaiser Karl, 350.

without addressing the Italian question? Was it the popularity of the war among its populace, channeling anger over Italian “betrayal” that distracted from an increasingly dire domestic situation? Was it the chance of achieving a military victory? Polzer-Hoditz quotes Conrad as saying that the road to France was through Italy, at least in a strategic sense;³⁹⁰ the success of his planned offensive in the spring of 1917 would force Italy to in turn put pressure on France to make peace with Austria-Hungary. Yet this is an aggressive, muscular interpretation of the situation, and one apparently specific to Conrad.³⁹¹ An Italian call for French aid might instead stymie Austrian peace efforts. Sixtus summed up the situation as follows: “France had promised to assist Italy in the conquest of Trieste; but had not undertaken to purchase, by her own sacrifices, the spoils which Italy had herself been unable to secure.”³⁹² France was, according to his interpretation, in danger of being exploited by Italy, which would eventually ask for military aid, and thereby bring French and Austrian troops into conflict.³⁹³

The Italian issue prevented Austria from making a wholehearted peace attempt while it was engaged on the Italian front; it made their proposals hypocritical, as they offered up Ottoman and German territory without including concessions that might have made a real difference. It put the Entente in a conundrum as to whether it could conclude a separate peace with Austria. Yet this situation was in Austria-Hungary’s power to solve. Karl rejected an Italian separate peace offer while Sixtus was negotiating with Entente leaders.³⁹⁴ Both sides of the Dual Monarchy believed that any concessions to Italy would set a negative precedent for the

³⁹⁰ Polzer-Hoditz, *Kaiser Karl*, 316.

³⁹¹ Perhaps to Conrad’s credit, he was not only fixated on Italy, but envisioned a general strategy in which defeating Italy had priority. “Im Westen entstand der Hexenkessel, in welchem die Massen verschwanden ohne entscheidenden Erfolg. Daher jetzt die Alliierten im Osten und Süden erledigen. Russland, Rumänien, Serbien, Montenegro und Italien damit das ganze Ententegebäude zu Fall bringen und auf England und Frankreich reduzieren und jetzt mit allen Kräften gegen diese.” Conrad, *Private Aufzeichnungen*, 118.

³⁹² Manteyer, *Austria’s Peace Offer*, 59.

³⁹³ In an interview with Poincaré on March 8th, 1917, the possibility that Italy might call for French aid is cited as a motive to act quickly, as a direct conflict between French and Austrian troops would hinder any peace talks. Manteyer, *Austria’s Peace Offer*, 62f. French troops were however already integrated into the Macedonian Front.

³⁹⁴ „Die k. u. k. Minister des Äußern verständigt das k. u. k. Armee Ober-Commando dass Italien ein Separatfriedensangebot gegen Abtretung Trentino gemacht habe, und dass dasselbe abgelehnt wurde. Graf Czernin hält nunmehr das Einsetzen eines italienischen Offensive nicht für ausgeschlossen.“ Tagesbericht des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äußern, 3. 4. 1917. Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XL/Interna, Tagesberichte des k. u. k. Ministeriums des Äußern / 1917 Dezember – 1917 April / Karton 57

minority ethnicities within their borders, and therefore adhered to a hard line policy. Italy was a barrier to peace because, quite simply, Austria-Hungary allowed it to be.

The Austro-Hungarian Nationality Problem

Italy was but one manifestation of the greater nationality problem Austria-Hungary faced. With this in mind, can the failure of the Sixtus Brief be attributed at least in part to the growing importance of the nationality question? Did the issues of irredentism and territorial cession create insurmountable problems for the external relations of the empire as well as its internal structure? Would agreeing to even a small border adjustment with Italy, as even Sixtus felt necessary, constitute a slippery slope that would eventually rip apart the empire? Karl, it seems, felt that this was the case. His refusal to budge is in some ways a powerful admission of his faltering power. As the Sixtus peace attempts show, Karl was unwilling to negotiate a peace that would have in any way affected the territorial integrity of his empire, for fear of setting a negative precedent. Should accession to irredentist desires become the norm, both the Austro-Germans and the Magyars would be vulnerable to their minority populations.

Austria-Hungary's difficulty in addressing the needs and wishes of its constituent ethnicities has its own history within the context of the First World War. At the outset of the fighting, the "Spirit of 1914" reportedly animated all corners of the empire.³⁹⁵ This semblance of unity would quickly be undermined by longstanding suspicions. Ruling elites on both sides of the Leitha adopted discriminatory policies against certain minority groups, deeming them unreliable and ultimately planting the seeds for internal conflict.³⁹⁶ Mark Cornwall, in his book *The Undermining of Austria-Hungary: The Battle for Hearts and Minds*, examines the role of front propaganda on the Eastern and Italian fronts in the eventual disintegration of the monarchy. Though the period that he studies in detail is ultimately outside the scope of this thesis, as it concerns the last year of the war, his observations on propaganda developments have relevance to Austria-Hungary's situation at the time of the Sixtus peace negotiations.

³⁹⁵ Cornwall, *The Undermining of Austria-Hungary*, 16.

³⁹⁶ Cornwall, *The Undermining of Austria-Hungary*, 18. Cornwall singles out the treatment of Czechs by the Habsburgs as the Russian army advanced, and of the Italians, who, until Italy declared war on Austria-Hungary in 1915, were seen as trustworthy citizens of the monarchy.

1917 represents for Cornwall a watershed year in the development of front propaganda. The efficacy of such techniques were tied to a certain type of warfare, namely trench warfare, where a certain amount of fraternization with the enemy was possible.³⁹⁷ This static situation materialized later on the Eastern and Italian fronts than was the case in the West. Cornwall's theory also takes as a starting point the declaration of war aims of all belligerents in January of 1917, on the initiative of the American President.³⁹⁸ Now that the goals were clear and public, more sophisticated propaganda could be developed. The Russian Revolution offered an indelible chance for the Central Powers to use front propaganda to spread hopes for a ceasefire;³⁹⁹ Cornwall appears to view this as the first volley of the Central Powers coordinated campaign for enemy sympathies. This experience led the Austro-Hungarians to use the same tactics against the Italians later in the war.⁴⁰⁰ This trajectory of front propaganda reflects the condition of the political entities involved in the war, in particular, the increasingly fragile Austria-Hungary. For irredentist front propaganda to have any effect, it must have played off tensions already present in an empire under extreme duress. However, the extent and form of this duress, in effect an existential crisis, is subject to intense academic debate.

Was Austria-Hungary itself anachronistic?

Popular narratives of the First World War invariably assert that Austria-Hungary was a moribund construct in 1914, some even going so far as to claim that this decline actually caused the war itself. A unified picture of Austria-Hungary's condition immediately prior to the war also does not emerge from existing scholarship on the subject. Rather, the plethora of opinions form a multifaceted image, one that takes perspective into account as well as the differences between foreign and domestic viability. The unique problem of creating unity out of its multiethnic character should not be undermined, yet no real alternative was put forth on a meaningful scale. By any measure, Austria-Hungary was not a military power in the same league as Germany, France, and Great Britain.⁴⁰¹ Yet during the war, it managed to

³⁹⁷ Cornwall, *The Undermining of Austria-Hungary*, 5.

³⁹⁸ Cornwall, *The Undermining of Austria-Hungary*, 4.

³⁹⁹ Cornwall, *The Undermining of Austria-Hungary*, 4f.

⁴⁰⁰ Cornwall, *The Undermining of Austria-Hungary*, 11.

⁴⁰¹ For exact figures on Austria-Hungary's defense budget, standing army, and military hardware in comparison to that of the other major European powers, see Herwig, *The First World War*, 12.

hold off the Russian and Italian armies, each of which was larger, and in the Russian case, significantly so. If indeed Austria-Hungary teetered on the brink of collapse, its demonstrated durability throughout the war would be impossible. Its lack of brilliant military victories should not eclipse its very real success in actual survival.

Historian Alan Sked makes an impassioned case against any presupposition that Austria-Hungary was in irreversible decline before the outbreak of the First World War. He believes that the dominant narrative of the war being caused by and subsequently eliminating anachronistic, declining empires is false, and moreover reflects a liberal bias in favor of the emerging democracies.⁴⁰² The emperors of Russia, Germany, and Austria-Hungary, he claims, increasingly had to work within legal and constitutional structures, and exercised little, if any, absolute or arbitrary power.⁴⁰³ While Sked's thesis does not deny the problems faced by these empires before the outbreak of the First World War; he demonstrates that these problems also affected the more "progressive" western powers. Which of entities would be forced to reform and change with the times, and which would be destroyed was, in his view, determined by the outcome in 1918. As the final nail in the coffin of the "declining empires" theory, Sked cites the extraordinary intellectual output, innovation, and vitality of the German, Russian, and Austro-Hungarian empires during the decades of their supposed deterioration.⁴⁰⁴

Sked traces an upward trajectory for the monarchy from the time of the *Ausgleich* until the war years. This upswing, while measured from diverse factors, is nonetheless comparative. Writing that the monarchy had faced no existential challenges between 1867 and 1914 on the level that it had faced in 1848-1849,⁴⁰⁵ Sked concludes that Austria-Hungary had been doing well and improving, presumably in regard to democratic reforms and the wellbeing of its citizenry.⁴⁰⁶ While again, this is comparative and sheds little light on Austria-Hungary's

⁴⁰² Alan Sked, *The European Empires. A case of fall without decline?* In: Emil Brix, Klaus Koch, Elisabeth Vyslonzil (Hg.), *The Decline of Empires* (München/Wien 2001) 149-173, here 152f, 155.

⁴⁰³ Sked, *The European Empires*, 152f.

⁴⁰⁴ Sked, *The European Empires*, 171.

⁴⁰⁵ Alan Sked, *The Decline and Fall of the Habsburg Empire, 1815-1918* (London/New York¹ 1989) 231f.

⁴⁰⁶ Sked's assessment of Austria-Hungary's progress relative to its time and its neighbors is supported by a recent article by Gary Cohen, detailing how the empire dealt with political and ethnic minorities. Cohen concludes that for a European political construct, Austria-Hungary responded fairly well to the needs of its diverse peoples, and that up until the outbreak of the war, most agitators were content to develop and change the structures they had at hand within the empire, rather than call for its destruction. Gary B. Cohen. *Nationalist*

international standing, Sked does make an extremely cogent point: calls for the destruction of the monarchy or empire had not emerged as a solution to the problems that Austria-Hungary faced. Perennial problems were in the process of being solved, there were no attempts to topple the Habsburgs and furthermore, Sked argues, this took place against a backdrop of continued economic growth, higher living standards, and better integrated infrastructure and finance.⁴⁰⁷ That, in Sked's words, there existed no internal pressure to destroy Austria-Hungary before the war⁴⁰⁸ makes depictions of prewar decline unrealistic.

To some extent, Sked justifies his views on the durability of the Dual Monarchy construct – the foundation of the multinational empire – on a quote from Harvard University President A. Lawrence Lowell in a survey published in 1896 of *Governments and Parties in Continental Europe*:

...the two countries are not held together from within by any affection or loyalty to a common Fatherland, but are forced together by a pressure from outside which makes the union an international and military necessity. Austria, on the one hand, would not be large enough alone to be a really valuable ally to Germany and Italy; and if not an ally, she would likely become a prey, for she contains districts which they would be glad to absorb.... On the other hand, the Magyars without Austria would not be sufficiently strong to block the ambitions of Russia, or resist the tide of Pan-Slavism. They would not only have little influence outside their own dominions, but they would run the grave risk of foreign interference in favour of the Slavs in Hungary. The union, therefore, is unavoidable, and it is very little closer than is absolutely necessary to carry out the purposes for which it exists.⁴⁰⁹

The question arising from this perception is that if outside forces held Austria-Hungary together in the second half of the nineteenth century, were these same forces still present in the twentieth? Could they still hold the Dual Monarchy and its constituent ethnicities together or had they themselves developed in other directions? Was it then ultimately, that Austria-Hungary lacked the requisite internal solidarity to resist disintegration? Strangely enough, it would seem that the international situation that Lowell describes was more or less still in place after the war. Austria-Hungary was, fundamentally, the sum of diverse parts and located at a geographical crossroads in Europe. That no part of the Empire was able to

Politics and the Dynamics of State and Civil Society in the Habsburg Monarchy, 1867-1914. In: Central European History. Vol. 40, No. 2. (Jun., 2007) 241-278, here 274-277.

⁴⁰⁷ Sked, *The Decline and Fall of the Habsburg Empire*, 231f.

⁴⁰⁸ Sked, *The Decline and Fall of the Habsburg Empire*, 231f.

⁴⁰⁹ Quoted from Sked, *The Decline and Fall of the Habsburg Empire*, 233f.

stand alone at the status of a Great Power, and that all constituent groups could easily be absorbed into their more homogenous neighbors necessitated and contributed to the survival of the dualist entity.

Yet this conception and argumentation ultimately pins the idea of decline on the concept of breaking up the monarchy. Certainly they are connected – a dismembered monarchy must have gone through a period of decline, however short, in order to get to the place where the bonds holding it together weaken enough to break. However it might make sense to separate decline from dismemberment. Sked pushes against the idea that Austria-Hungary was in decline and in danger of falling apart before the outbreak of the war. To this aim, he uses an internally-defined definition of decline, one that measures the Habsburg Empire against its own historical trajectory, and summarily disproves it. Such decline, or lack thereof, need not exist if Austria-Hungary is instead declining in comparison to the other European Great Powers. It could modernize its infrastructure and make progress on integrating its nationalities while simultaneously losing its place in the post-1815 world order it had helped set up. This development, rather than anything internal, might be better termed Austria-Hungary's decline – a decline in relative importance.

Paul Schroeder, whose assessment of Austria-Hungary and its situation during the Great War directly contradicts that of Sked, depicts the empire as moribund. This condition has, as would be expected, drastic effects on the international system, on the balance of power, and on the actions of the other Great Powers. For Schroeder, Austria-Hungary's comparative weakness opens up not only a vacuum, but puts other powers in a quandary as to whether the empire should be kept alive or destroyed. According to Schroeder, Great Britain had more or less discounted Austria-Hungary as a member of the European Great Powers in the 1890s, comparing its decline to that of Turkey – the “Sick Man of Europe.”⁴¹⁰ Although it was in Britain's interest to protect Austria-Hungary as it had Turkey, it allowed the responsibility to fall instead on Germany.⁴¹¹ Germany, powerful though it was, found itself isolated in Central Europe, its only reliable ally being Austria-Hungary.

⁴¹⁰ *Schroeder, World War I as Galloping Gertie*, 148f.

⁴¹¹ *Schroeder, World War I as Galloping Gertie*, 148f.

Schroeder then raises a question of immediate relevance to the Sixtus peace negotiations. He establishes that the continued existence of Austria-Hungary could have been used to benefit Britain, or at least maintain the European balance of power in a manner that was favorable to greater British interests. Yet Austria-Hungary was an enemy power. Should, in Schroeder's words the Entente "sacrifice their interests to save a rival power from succumbing to its own internal weaknesses?"⁴¹² The question is asked in regard to the situation before the outbreak of war in 1914, yet it could be asked of Britain in 1917 as Sixtus' offer was considered. The overarching consideration remains the aftereffects of Austro-Hungarian disintegration, tying back into the question of Austria-Hungary's effect on the German ally. If the Entente were simply to allow it or even encourage it to collapse, would this have a detrimental effect on Germany? Schroeder claims that directly before the outbreak of war, Berlin and Vienna feared that Austria-Hungary was in danger of collapse,⁴¹³ without indicated how or why this might happen. While a certain amount of trepidation regarding Austria-Hungary's fighting ability relative to that of other major powers, it is difficult to see where the general impression of a tottering empire is coming from. Even Franz Joseph's statement "if we must go under... we better go under decently"⁴¹⁴ does not necessarily signify that the empire is moribund. Rather, the old emperor made evident that he chose, so to speak, to set his life upon a cast – the next major military conflict will either reinvigorate Austria-Hungary or destroy it. Worries of collapse, while valid, are at their most credible when they are connected with the prospect of military defeat.

The scholarly accounts given by Sked and Schroeder demonstrate the importance of perspective and of clarifying the exact subject for analysis in this case. Their assessments of Austria-Hungary's durability or frailty stem from their particular perspectives and what they choose to examine. Their apparent diametric opposition is the result because they analyze two different topics. Sked examines Austria-Hungary's internal structure and vitality, whereas Schroeder is looking at its power vis a vis other (rising) powers. By the dawn of the twentieth century, Austria-Hungary could hardly be seen as a rising power, even on the most generous of terms. Again, Sked and Schroeder are using different yardsticks. Sked's

⁴¹² *Schroeder, World War I as Galloping Gertie*, 148f.

⁴¹³ *Schroeder, World War I as Galloping Gertie*, 152.

⁴¹⁴ Quoted from *Herwig, The First World War*, 11.

domestic focus leads him to assess Austria-Hungary's stability by the perception of its populace and its ability to reform to meet specific and internal needs. He finds that Austria-Hungary was in the process of becoming a better version of itself, was addressing its weaknesses, and showed measurable improvement.⁴¹⁵ As far as Austria-Hungary was a viable construct in the European balance of power, the argument in favor can point to the fact that the empire survived four years of world war, only to collapse when it had been overwhelmingly defeated. It withstood action on two fronts against two significant foes, and managed to neutralize the country with which it had gone to war in the first place in relatively short order. Schroeder is analyzing the situation from the viewpoint of British foreign policy, and thereby assesses Austria-Hungary's place in the European balance of power over many decades. Britain, whose interests were global,⁴¹⁶ would be predisposed to view Austria-Hungary as a declining power.

Sked's thesis of Austro-Hungarian durability, which for the purposes of this thesis serve to explain the actions of decision-makers who believed in the empire enough to try to save it, is not unique among academics studying the Habsburg empire in its last century of existence. Maureen Healy, in her book *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I* measures civilian participation and interest in the k. u. k. government by petitions and letter writing. In stark contrast to the assertion that Austria-Hungary died with Franz Joseph, Healy notes that letter writing and petitions from civilians grew tremendously in 1917 and remained high.⁴¹⁷ Healy interprets this information as suggesting that a dissimilarity between the elites and the common people may have existed in their perception of the Habsburgs. For "ordinary" people, the monarchy remained highly relevant until it completely collapsed in 1918.⁴¹⁸ The elites, by virtue of their more worldly perspective, could comment more freely on Austria-Hungary's problems and the likelihood

⁴¹⁵ Sked, *The Decline and Fall of the Habsburg Empire*, 231f.

⁴¹⁶ Britain's lack of interest in the specificities of Central European borders is also argued for by Fest, who claims that Britain still considered itself a world power. He supports this view with a statement from Grey, who said in discussion with Paul Cambon in 1916 "for the most part our aims were outside Europe." Fest, *British War Aims and German Peace Feelers*, 286.

⁴¹⁷ Maureen Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire. Total War and Everyday Life in World War I*. (Cambridge/New York 2004) 282.

⁴¹⁸ Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire*, 283.

of disintegration.⁴¹⁹ As Healy demonstrates, ordinary people placed considerable faith and trust in their emperor until the end.⁴²⁰ Gary B. Cohen, in his article “Neither Absolutism nor Anarchy: New Narratives on Society and Government in Late Imperial Austria” provides evidence for the increasing level of popular participation in the context of interest groups and populist movements in the Austro-Hungarian government of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴²¹ This popular energy demonstrates in his account an antidote to the centrifugal force of nationalism; moreover the political environment it created was more flexible and modern.⁴²² In another article, “Nationalist Politics and the Dynamics of State and Civil Society in the Habsburg Monarchy, 1867-1914,” Cohen shows how nationalist movements among Austria-Hungary’s minority ethnicities were actually integrated into the structure of the monarchy as a whole. Rather than attempting to achieve complete independence from the Habsburgs, these movements sought to create more autonomy for their members within the empire.⁴²³ Moreover, Cohen argues, the Dual Monarchy construct, in particular Cisleithenia, was flexible enough to accommodate and even foster these political developments.⁴²⁴

Robert Kann frames the debate over Austro-Hungarian wartime decline and dissolution as one between internal and external causes.⁴²⁵ Did internal discord weaken Austria-Hungary, or was it ripped apart by outside forces for destruction? Though Kann does not subscribe to the belief that Austria-Hungary was a viable political entity in the 20th century whose decline and death were primarily the result of losing a world war, he likewise does not advocate that Austria-Hungary was doomed even before 1914. Instigating a world war, he argues,

⁴¹⁹ *Healy*, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire*, 283. This raises the question of whether Sixtus’ separate peace as opposed to Czernin and Karl’s hope to mediate a general one was the result of Sixtus’ more global perspective.

⁴²⁰ *Healy*, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire*, 283. As previously stated, Healy bases her argument largely on the phenomenon of letter-writing, and the content of those letters, as a sign that k. u. k. citizens viewed the emperor as a father figure, often to replace one lost or fighting on the front. She does not see the decline in imperial authority as solely due to Karl’s inability to inspire the paternalistic authority of his predecessor. Instead, she claims that wartime misery grew beyond the point at which the emperor could conceivably help – most of letters contained requests for financial assistance.

⁴²¹ Gary B. *Cohen*, *Neither Absolutism nor Anarchy. New Narratives on Society and Government in Late Imperial Austria*. In: *Austrian History Yearbook*, Volume XXIX, (1998) 37-61 here 22, 25.

⁴²² *Cohen*, *Neither Absolutism nor Anarchy*, 25.

⁴²³ *Cohen*, *Nationalist Politics*, 242.

⁴²⁴ *Cohen*, *Nationalist Politics*, 242.

⁴²⁵ *Kann*, *A History of the Habsburg Empire*, 517.

removed the one prop holding up the entire construct: time.⁴²⁶ With time on its side, and a favorable international situation, Austria-Hungary might have survived.⁴²⁷ In using a combined approach to weigh in on this particular debate, Kann emphasizes Austria-Hungary's role in its own destruction, while keeping in mind Austria-Hungary's international situation, which was increasingly determined by countries other than itself. For Austria-Hungary in the last two years of the war, it becomes difficult to draw a separating line between internal and external factors. The nationality problem which eventually turned fatal was an internal problem that became an external force as national self-determination was taken up as a cause by foreign governments. Whether or not Austria-Hungary was able to handle its internal issues on its own grew more and more irrelevant, as the larger question had become its role in the European balance of power. This, ultimately, was an external decision.

Even if Austria-Hungary was indeed outdated by 1914, as Arno Mayer and Gary Shanafelt claim, it was quite durable. In his book *The Persistence of the Old Regime*, Mayer argues that the *ancien regime* retained a modicum of political power and a firm grip on its populace until the start of the war.⁴²⁸ Although he believes that the old order was doomed, the First World War represented their fight to maintain power and the protracted nature of the conflict showed how entrenched and adaptable they were even in decline.⁴²⁹ Shanafelt writes that despite Austria-Hungary's frail condition at the beginning of the twentieth century, it clung stubbornly to life until the war made its further existence impossible.⁴³⁰ What ailed the k. u. k. before the outbreak of war - the problems inherent in integrating a variety of political ideas and ethnicities into a functional whole - did not necessarily require a dissolution of the state.⁴³¹ John Boyer, in his book *Culture and Political Crisis in Vienna: Christian Socialism in Power, 1897 - 1918*, adds to the scholarly opinion in favor of Austria-Hungary's structural sturdiness, mentioning the rising power of the bourgeois in each ethnic group, but maintaining that this power manifested itself fully within the context of the dynastic state

⁴²⁶ Kann, *A History of the Habsburg Empire*, 519.

⁴²⁷ Kann, *A History of the Habsburg Empire*, 519.

⁴²⁸ Arno J. Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime. Europe to the Great War* (New York 1981) 4.

⁴²⁹ Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime*, 4.

⁴³⁰ Shanafelt, *The Secret Enemy*, vii.

⁴³¹ Shanafelt, *The Secret Enemy*, 101.

system.⁴³² From this one can assume that the social and political configuration of Austria-Hungary was indeed changing, but not necessarily in the direction of complete dissolution of the monarchy.⁴³³ Indeed it appears that “disintegration” and “dismemberment” represent two different concepts when describing the downfall of Austria-Hungary. Internal weakness – “disintegration” – only became the destructive force that it was when encouraged by “dismemberment.” Dismemberment, connoting an outside force acting upon the empire, is a more accurate description of the problems and worries plaguing the monarchy in the last two years of the war. Karl’s attempt to conclude peace along the radical lines of the Sixtus proposals was testament to the fact that there remained some hope that Austria-Hungary might survive the war. To this one might add, the Sixtus proposals virtually admit that Austria-Hungary *had* declined, that it no longer has the international clout of a Great Power, but that this did not completely diminish its regional importance. Nor does it mean that Austria-Hungary was destined for dismemberment at the hands of foreign powers. Instead, the Sixtus proposals might be taken as a realistic assessment: Austria-Hungary could not hope for a *Siegfrieden*, it faced existential threats, but as a second-rate power aligned with powerful Britain and France, it may have had a future. Austria-Hungary’s downfall was as much if not more the fault of its international situation – which it doubtless helped create – as it was the result of structural flaws. These internal weaknesses were at their most credible when advocated for by outside forces. Habsburg diplomacy two years into the war reflects this situation most accurately: they needed to change the external situation as quickly as possible in order to neutralize the internal threat of national self-determination gaining Entente support.

Timing

The Habsburgs found themselves in a race against time as the war entered its third and fourth years, primarily due to the growing support for national self-determination. Stevenson believes that Austria-Hungary could have survived, if somewhat diminished, had it

⁴³² Boyer, *Culture and Political Crisis in Vienna*, xii.

⁴³³ Karl is often associated with a plan to federalize Austria-Hungary to some extent, mostly responding to pressures from Pan-Slavism. The plan entailed the creation of a South Slav state under Habsburg rule, and would downplay the dualist construct created in 1867. Brennan discusses this extensively and argues against the prevalent assertion that this was a sign of Karl’s federalist leanings. *Brennan, Reforming Austria-Hungary*, 38f.

acquiesced to French wishes, but an independent Czechoslovakia would be too much for the Habsburgs.⁴³⁴ With this claim, one might take into account the international momentum gathering behind Czech bids for independence. With agitation calling for national self-determination occurring as far away as Chicago and Cleveland;⁴³⁵ the Entente felt a certain pressure to respond on behalf of Austria-Hungary's minorities. Czechoslovakia moreover was the industrial heart of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and its loss would cripple the economic and military power of the Habsburgs. Czechoslovakian independence, like any infringement on Austria-Hungary's integrity, would serve as an inspiration to other nationalist groups. The Quai d'Orsay was at the time of the Sixtus peace attempts courting Czech nationalist leaders, this is demonstrated by Berthelot's insistence on including their demands in the official Entente reply to Wilson in the winter of 1916/1917. In a sense, the Sixtus negotiations and its bid for Austro-Hungarian survival in the postwar world came at the last possible moment – 1917 was the last full year in which Austro-Hungarian unity was still plausible. Wilson's own "Fourteen Points" speech in January 1918 advocated increased autonomy for Austria-Hungary's ethnic groups within the framework of the old empire.⁴³⁶ Wilson specifically calls for the preservation of Austria-Hungary at the same time as he advocates increased rights for its constituencies. This can be taken as explicit proof that self-determination and preservation of the Habsburg Empire were not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Cornwall illustrates the further disenfranchisement of Austria-Hungary's minorities and their subsequent vulnerability to enemy propaganda with an internal episode chronologically paralleling Sixtus' talks in France. A reconvention of the Reichsrat at the end of May 1917,

⁴³⁴ *Stevenson*, *French War Aims Against Germany*, 57. These wishes presumably would have been based on French support of the Italian, Serbian, Romanian, and Russian causes.

⁴³⁵ *Berichte aus Washington 1916* (all dates in European form).

1714/II "Monarchiefeindl. tschechische Propaganda in Chicago, Ill." 4/8/1916

1968/II "Tschechische revolutionaere Bewegung" 5/8/1916

2218/II "Allslaventag in Cleveland" 21/8/1916

2473/II "Befreiung in Kanada internierter Polen" 29/9/1916

2122/II "Ukrainische Bewegung in den Vereinigten Staaten" 12/8/1916

AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv XXXIII 52. USA 1915 – 1917 / Karton 52.

⁴³⁶ "The peoples of Austria-Hungary, whose place among the nations we wish to see safeguarded and assured, should be accorded the freest opportunity to autonomous development." Address of President Wilson on the Conditions of Peace Delivered at a Joint Session of the Two Houses of Congress, 8. 1. 1918. In: James Brown Scott (Hg.), *Official Statements of War Aims and Peace Proposals: December 1916-November 1918* (Washington 1921) 234-239, here 238.

intended to symbolize Austrian unity, ended up instead having the opposite effect. When deputies from Czechoslovak, Yugoslav, and Ukrainian lands presented demands for restructuring the monarchy as a federal state, they were met with stark refusal. This, in the words of Cornwall, touched off a “secondary mobilization” in Austria that took the form of nationalist agitation against the Austro-Hungarian war effort and appealed to a war-weary populace in the outer regions of the monarchy.⁴³⁷

The Alliance between Austria-Hungary and Germany

Perhaps the most significant question brought up by the Sixtus Brief and subsequent affair is that of Germany – more specifically, the blatant betrayal of Germany. How could Austria-Hungary offer to cede territory over which its ally fought the hardest in order to secure a separate peace for itself? Though the clause is empty in that the Habsburgs could not give up territory that did not belong to them in the first place, this episode in Austro-Hungarian diplomatic history has a great deal to say about the alliance between the two Central European empires. By any measure, Austria-Hungary and the German Empire were no longer in a partnership of equals and no longer fought necessarily for the same aims. Whereas Austria-Hungary strove to maintain its territorial integrity and hoped to exit the war as soon as possible, Germany was still intent on winning, and was concentrating its efforts ever more on the stalemated Western Front. The Habsburg hope of peace was in many ways an unrealistic one, though the empire’s war effort was so heavily dependent on German economic and military reinforcement that continued fighting not only brought further exhaustion, but also less independence.

For Germany, it was an alliance of necessity – there existed no better option. It conflicted over territories to the west and east with France and Russia, and its growing industrial might menaced Great Britain at sea. Only Austria-Hungary was significant enough to be a worthy ally, yet also relatively free from conflicts of interests, unthreatening, and shared at least some cultural similarities. Other than the advantageous geographical position of the Habsburg empire, the alliance did not augment Germany’s firepower to a meaningful degree.

⁴³⁷ Cornwall, *The Undermining of Austria-Hungary*, 30.

Shortly before the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the German Ambassador to Austria-Hungary, Heinrich von Tschirschky described the alliance in less than positive terms:

How often I consider the question, whether it is really worthwhile for us to bind ourselves so tightly to this state structure cracking in all its seams, and to keep on with the tiresome work of dragging it along with us. But I see no other political constellation which as a substitute could offer us anything more than the alliance with this Central European power. Since without this alliance, our policy would of necessity have to be directed towards a partition of the Monarchy.⁴³⁸

The alliance was similarly ambivalent for Vienna, and it posed concrete problems from the outset. The ratio of German to Austro-Hungarian military strength was, according to one source, estimated as 4:3 in 1879, 2:1 in 1914, and 3:1 by 1917.⁴³⁹ In other words, when it came time for the alliance to be tested, it was no longer the relatively stable arrangement it had been when it was first concluded. Austria-Hungary had no conflict with France or Great Britain, though Bismarck's statement that the Balkans were not worth the bones of a Pomeranian grenadier were not borne out by German war aims and interests in the first decades of the 20th century.⁴⁴⁰ Lothar Höbelt elaborates on the concept of a strength ratio, comparing it to respective populations and economic factors.⁴⁴¹ By any measure, Austria-Hungary's contribution to the alliance declined drastically during the war.

Kann, in an article comparing alliances and ententes, postulates that in the case of rigidly constructed alliances, there is a "built-in centrifugal tendency toward weakening the ties."⁴⁴² Alliance negotiations, according to Kann, consist of attempts by the parties involved to minimize their own commitments while broadly defining those of their partners.⁴⁴³ Ententes, on the other hand, are constructed first and foremost to serve common interests, which in Kann's conception, encourages the participants to strengthen their ties.⁴⁴⁴ In the case of

⁴³⁸ Quoted from *Shanafelt*, *The Secret Enemy*, 7.

⁴³⁹ *Shanafelt*, *The Secret Enemy*, 8.

⁴⁴⁰ Prior to the outbreak of war, the Germans had taken advantage of Austria-Hungary's troubled standing in the Balkans to make economic inroads in Serbia and Romania. *Shanafelt*, *The Secret Enemy*, 8f.

⁴⁴¹ "Put another way: at the beginning of the war, the power ratio roughly resembled population figures (65 million Germans to 52 million Austrians); at the height of the war it more closely followed economic factors like steel production (14 million tons to 2 million in 1914)." *Höbelt*, *Former Masters Playing Second Fiddle*, 121.

⁴⁴² Robert A. Kann, *Alliances Versus Ententes*. In: *World Politics*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Jul., 1976) 611-621, here 612.

⁴⁴³ *Kann*, *Alliances Versus Ententes*, 611.

⁴⁴⁴ *Kann*, *Alliances Versus Ententes*, 612.

Austria-Hungary and the German Empire, it becomes ever more difficult to find common ground as the war progressed. Frictions between the two Germanic empires were even evident at the start of the conflict, as they continually struggled with disagreement in realizing their military aims. By 1917, Austria-Hungary was forced to act against its own interests by remaining in the war, which, in line with Kann's reasoning on alliances that turn counterproductive, served to turn the pact into a sort of straitjacket.⁴⁴⁵ The alliance between Austria-Hungary and the German Empire, originally conceived as a solid block of deterrence, began to crack from within. Other than a few outdated conceptions of *Mitteleuropa*, no common aims held it together. This became especially acute with the Russian Revolution, which removed the last significant common enemy of Germany and Austria-Hungary.

More sinister than a lack of common aims was the thought that the alliance was actively dangerous to Austria-Hungary, a viewpoint that was actively exploited by Sixtus himself to gain imperial backing for his attempt.⁴⁴⁶ Hugo Hantsch, writing during the interwar years, concludes that Austria-Hungary remained in the war to honor its alliance commitment, to its detriment and eventual destruction.⁴⁴⁷ A similar sentiment provides the basis for Shanafelt's argument, namely, that the alliance with the German Empire destroyed Austria-Hungary, though his thesis centers less on Austria-Hungary's alliance obligations and more on the very real and serious conflicts of interest between the two allies. The threat posed by Germany was twofold. Concretely, the alliance commitment to continue fighting ran the risk of driving Austria-Hungary into the ground, and there was considerable concern that Germany might take over its weak neighbor;⁴⁴⁸ it was already enormously involved in the k. u. k. military and economy. Moreover, the alliance with Germany even at its best could threaten the internal stability of the multinational Habsburg empire due to the emphasis it placed on

⁴⁴⁵ Kann, *Alliances Versus Ententes*, 617.

⁴⁴⁶ In a letter to Karl on March 16th, 1917, Sixtus writes "[a]lready Germany is betraying you where she can," meaning with Italy. Manteyer, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 67f. The statement comes near the end of a request for Karl to immediately sanction the four points of the Sixtus Brief and "adhere as closely as possible to my [Sixtus'] wording." Manteyer, *Austria's Peace Offer*, 65.

⁴⁴⁷ Hantsch, *Österreichs Friedensbemühungen 1916/18*, 16f.

⁴⁴⁸ Germany actually did plan to march into Austria-Hungary after the Habsburgs signed an armistice agreement on November 3rd, 1918. Kann considers this to be a strong argument against the plausibility of an earlier Austro-Hungarian separate peace, particularly in light of the weakened state of Germany's own forces in November 1918. Kann, *History of the Habsburg Empire*, 481.

German Austrians.⁴⁴⁹ This Germanic orientation would, as the argument goes, ensure Austro-German dominance in the empire, and provided a domestic policy rationale for *Mitteleuropa*.⁴⁵⁰ However, this was hardly conducive to maintaining the loyalty of the non-German elements within Austria-Hungary, nor did it make much of a case to the Entente for the continued existence of the Habsburg empire in Central Europe. Shanafelt notes that *Mitteleuropa* was not even popular among industrialists of any ethnicity in Austria-Hungary, as they would lose out to the stronger Germans.⁴⁵¹

Even before war broke out in 1914, the alliance was a troubled one. The decision to go to war, moreover, was not made in the spirit understanding and partnership, but rather, as Shanafelt claims, the opposite. Vienna, in his conception, had finally gotten the support it yearned for from Berlin, and was determined to make the most of it.⁴⁵² While one should here avoid coming to the conclusion that the alliance and the enthusiasm for the war lacked in practical considerations for its partners, the “Spirit of 1914” was hailed as a moment that put them briefly on the same page. Austria-Hungary had repeatedly asked for German assistance before 1914 in order to deal with its problems in the Balkans and with Italy; these requests had met with refusal.⁴⁵³ With the blank cheque from Germany and subsequent declaration of war on Serbia in July, Austria-Hungary hoped to solve its issues in the Balkans once and for all. Indeed, this phase of the war was characterized by cooperation between Germany and Austria-Hungary; Italy would prove much more divisive.

Germany balked at condoning Austrian action and contributing to the war effort on the Italian front. It greatly delayed declaring war on Italy and pushed Austria-Hungary to make whatever territorial concessions necessary to prevent Italy from joining with the Entente. Shanafelt interprets these actions as a sort of betrayal: Austria-Hungary felt as though its

⁴⁴⁹ For a review of scholarly interpretations of the German alliance’s effects on ethnic Germans in Austria-Hungary during the first half of the war, as well as an interpretation of Austrian feelings toward *Mitteleuropa*, see Richard W. Kapp, *Divided Loyalties. The German Reich and Austria-Hungary in Austro-German Discussions of War Aims, 1914-1916*. In: *Central European History*, Vol. 17, No. 2/3 (Jun. – Sep., 1984) 120-139.

⁴⁵⁰ Kapp, *Austro-German Discussions of War Aims*, 138.

⁴⁵¹ Shanafelt, *The Secret Enemy*, 72-75.

⁴⁵² Shanafelt, *The Secret Enemy*, 22f.

⁴⁵³ Shanafelt, *The Secret Enemy*, 21f.

interests were not being taken seriously or honored within the alliance agreement.⁴⁵⁴ Austria-Hungary's displeasure was such, that according to Shanafelt, friction over Italy in 1915 led to the first inklings of German fear that Austria-Hungary might consider a separate peace with Russia.⁴⁵⁵ Shanafelt also links growing pressures in Austria-Hungary for peace to the Monarchy's increasing financial dependence on Germany.⁴⁵⁶ The issues of Italy and financial dependence surfaced in 1915; after only one year of war and the unfortunate prospect of several more, it was increasingly evident that Austria-Hungary's interests did not lie in continuing to fight, nor in honoring an alliance that obliged them to continue to fight.

Discord did not end with the issue of Italy in the first two years of the war. The Central Powers received the Entente's refusal to consider their peace proposals on the 30th of December 1916. By January 9th, Germany had already resolved to resume unrestricted submarine warfare in less than a month, and it reached this decision without consulting with or even informing Austria-Hungary.⁴⁵⁷ Problems within the alliance also caused rifts within Austria-Hungary, particularly between Czernin and Karl. The Foreign Minister tried simultaneously to emphasize the alliance with Germany whilst demonstrating that Austria-Hungary was not beholden to its stronger ally, as this would destroy any chances the Habsburgs might have as negotiators.⁴⁵⁸ Czernin was further hemmed in by his desire for a general peace, which for him meant an unconditional allegiance to Germany. This amounted to a catch-22: to negotiate with the Entente, Austria-Hungary needed to show independence, yet as a mediator it had to maintain some connection to Germany. Yet at this point, connection to the far stronger Germany obliterated Austria-Hungary's potential as an independent actor on the international stage. Karl's deepest wish was also a general peace, but he showed more flexibility in regards to the German alliance; his son Otto evidently

⁴⁵⁴ A sense of betrayal, or at least of disunity, is present in the diplomatic correspondence regarding the Austro-Italian war. This missive to Burian from Hohenlohe shows an early response (about a month after Italy declared war on Austria-Hungary) of Germany: "So seine erst kürzlich wieder Nachrichten aus der Schweiz gekommen, dass Deutschland eine formelle Kriegserklärung gegen Italien nur deshalb vermeide, um in gegebenen Falle als Friedensvermittler zwischen uns und Italien aufzutreten, wobei deutscherseits ein Druck auf uns ausgeübt werden würde, als Friedensbasis Italien alle jene Gebiete anzutragen, die wir vor Kriegsbeginn abzutreten bereit gewesen wären." 21. K.u.K. Österreichisch-Ungarische Botschaft in Berlin GEHEIM XLVII. Z. 69/P A-B. Deutschland und Italien, 21. 7. 1915. AT-OeStA/ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv I, Geheimeakten, Krieg 1914-1918/ Liasse XLVII/5 b-g/ Karton 511.

⁴⁵⁵ *Shanafelt, The Secret Enemy*, 64.

⁴⁵⁶ *Shanafelt, The Secret Enemy*, 82f.

⁴⁵⁷ *Shanafelt, The Secret Enemy*, 114.

⁴⁵⁸ *Shanafelt, The Secret Enemy*, 122.

believed that Karl wanted to negotiate an end to the war, but would, should Germany prove intractable, accept a separate peace.⁴⁵⁹ In any case, Karl's loyalty to Germany was far less pronounced than Czernin's, and appears to have declined as Sixtus' negotiations progressed. A letter to Czernin dated May 14th, 1917 displays a surprising degree of mistrust and blatant anger on the part of Karl.⁴⁶⁰ Although the letter was written after the Kaiser dismissed the

⁴⁵⁹ *Shanafelt*, *The Secret Enemy*, 129.

⁴⁶⁰ Lieber Graf Czernin!

Ich habe heute das Ministerratsprotokoll für gemeinsame Angelegenheiten in betreff der Handelsbeziehungen zu Deutschland bekommen. Ich bin damit gar nicht einverstanden. So wie ich jede Militärkonvention mit Deutschland auf das entschiedenste zurückgewiesen habe, so muss ich auch jeden Handelsvertrag, der uns in intimere Beziehungen zu Deutschland als zu jedem andern Staat bringt, perhorreszieren. Der Zweck dieses Handelsvertrages für Deutschland ist ganz klar, es ist dies ein Baustein im großen Werke der Hohenzollern, Österreich in ihre vollständige Abhängigkeit à la Bayern zu bringen.

Im Jahre 66 wurden wir von Preußen durch Bismarck und Moltke geschlagen und aus Deutschland hinausgeworfen. Hiemit war das eine Drama des Hauses Habsburg erledigt. Da aber Bismarck einerseits die Vitalität unseres lieben Österreich kannte, andererseits aber wusste, dass für zwei deutsche Staaten in Mitteleuropa kein Platz ist, ersann er den Dreibund. Zweck: unseren Todfeind Italien durch das Bündnis zu stärken und zu zwingen, seinen die Großmachtstellung der Habsburgermonarchie gefährdenden und zersetzenden Einfluss auf unserer Italiener zu dulden und uns auf friedlichem Wege oder durch einen gemeinsamen Krieg gänzlich in Deutschlands militärische und wirtschaftliche Abhängigkeit zu bringen. Beweise meiner ersten Behauptung: im Frieden: die fortgesetzten Demarchen der Deutschen zugunsten der Italiener (Hohenlohesche Verordnungen in Triest etc.), im Kriege: das fortgesetzte Drängen der Deutschen auf Abtretung der italienischen Teile Südtirols vor dem italienischen Kriege. Sogar Kaiser Wilhelm hat mir gegenüber oft von dem „italienischen“ Gebiete von Folgaria gesprochen ... Militärisch arbeiten sie aber immer weiter, uns zu knechten. Unsere herrliche Armee hat im Jahre 14 allein den Krieg gegen den russischen Koloss geführt und Berlin gedeckt, nach dem Echech by Luck (der übrigens dem deutschen an der Marne sehr geähnelt hat) wurde durch die unverantwortliche Dummheit des damaligen Oberkommandos die Oberste Leitung durch den Deutschen Kaiser ausgesprochen. Dann kam die traurige Periode des gegenseitigen Austausches der Offiziere, der nebenbei auch ein aufgelegter Unsinn war. Wie soll ein preußischer Hauptmann ein böhmisches Bataillon in einem Momente begeistern, wo es gilt, vom Manne des Höchste, en Einsatz seines Lebens, zu verlangen? Natürlich erweckte all dies im Auslande die Idee, dass Österreich gänzlich unter Preußens Einfluss stünde, was natürlich nicht zur Beschleunigung des Friedens beitrug. Ein eklatanter militärischer Sieg Deutschlands wäre unser Ruin. Deutschland hat immer den Hintergedanken, dass, wenn es schlecht geht, es immer noch Österreich als Kompensationsobjekt hat. Der Friede à l'aimable auf dem status quo wäre für uns das Allerbeste, denn dann wäre Deutschland nicht zu übermütig, und wir hätten es uns mit den Westmächten, die eigentlich gar nicht unsere Feinde sind, nicht ganz verdorben. Dies müssen wir erreichen und wir dürften, ohne Italien zu spielen, nichts versäumen, was uns auch, eventuell gegen den Willen Deutschlands, zum Frieden im oben angedeuteten Sinne bringt. Ein Zugrundegehen mit Deutschland nur aus reiner Noblesse wäre Selbstmord und würde mit dem bisherigen Verhalten Deutschlands nicht in Einklang zu bringen sein. Aus all dem komme ich nochmals darauf, dass ich einen für Deutschland so günstigen Handelsvertrag niemals zugeben kann, weil wir dann wirtschaftlich gänzlich ausgeliefert sind und so in alle Unendlichkeit keinen Frieden schließen können. Dabei arbeiten die Deutschen überall unseren wirtschaftlichen Interessen entgegen. – Bismarck würde sich sonst zu sehr freuen!

Ich bin überzeugt von der Loyalität des Kaisers Wilhelm, er meint es nach seiner Art sehr gut mit uns, aber seine Ratgeber – und man weiß, was die für einen Einfluss auf ihn haben!

Resümierend glaube ich, dass für Österreich die einzige Möglichkeit, gut aus dieser Schamastik herauszukommen, ist, einen Friede ohne Annexion und nach dem Kriege, außer Deutschland als Gegengewicht, ein Bündnis mit Frankreich. Dagegen wird man sagen, die deutsch-französischen Gegensätze sind unüberbrückbar. Wie war aber die Sache zwischen uns und Italien?

Ich habe Ihnen all dies geschrieben, weil ich auf der Bahn Zeit hatte, einmal die ganze Lage gründlich zu überdenken, und ich bin von der Richtigkeit all dieses voll überzeugt.

Italian offer for peace in April 1917, it sheds some light on the Austrian mindset. Without directly implicating Wilhelm II, Karl's frustration with the German ally borders almost on paranoia – a German victory, he claims, would be the ruin of Austria-Hungary. Pushed already to the brink by bullish Germany, it is evident from this letter that Austria-Hungary would make no further sacrifices or concessions for a general peace. Near the end of the letter (“Resümierend glaube ich,...”) Karl explicitly states that Austria-Hungary's only chance for survival is at the side of France and Great Britain, opposing Germany.

In pointing out the troubles besetting the alliance between Austria-Hungary and Germany, Shanafelt builds up a strong case for the actions taken by Karl and Sixtus in 1917. From the very beginning of the war, the *Nibelungentreue* was undercut by mutual distrust and a lack of common aims, and Shanafelt goes so far as to say that the alliance itself played the decisive role in the demise of Austria-Hungary.⁴⁶¹ Although little Germany had done thus far could be compared to Sixtus' bold offer to give France Alsace-Lorraine, such actions did not occur in a vacuum. To prevent Rumania and Italy from entering the war on the side of the Entente, Germany pushed hard for territorial cessions on the part of the Magyars and the Austro-Germans. Shanafelt depicts these policies as weakening the already-fragile bonds between Germany and Austria-Hungary, and as engendering suspicion and defensiveness on the part of the Habsburgs.⁴⁶²

Höbelt draws an enlightening parallel between the relationship of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to its German ally in the First World War and that of Great Britain to the United States in the next in an essay entitled “Former Masters Playing Second Fiddle: Austria-Hungary in World War I and Britain in World War II.” The “older” powers had in each case been the instigator, in each case they had chosen war as an effort to save face and keep their position among the constellation of Great Powers.⁴⁶³ Both Austria-Hungary and Britain had managed to preserve the appearance of parity with their stronger ally up until the war broke

In steter Freundschaft
Ihr Karl

Quoted from Karl Freiherrn von *Werkmann*, *Deutschland als Verbündeter: Kaiser Karls Kampf um den Frieden* (Berlin 1931), 170-172. Werkmann served as Karl's secretary.

⁴⁶¹ *Shanafelt*, *The Secret Enemy*, vii.

⁴⁶² *Shanafelt*, *The Secret Enemy*, 53.

⁴⁶³ *Höbelt*, *Former Masters Playing Second Fiddle*, 122.

out, at which point they fell rapidly and drastically behind.⁴⁶⁴ Höbelt points out the similarities between Britain and Austria-Hungary in regard to their ally. Both Germany and the United States separated plans for achieving military victory from postwar aims; they also were reticent in discussing such aims with the junior partner.⁴⁶⁵

A commonality shared by both junior partners was, in Höbelt's words, that they were "far more conscious of war as a continuation of politics by other means and not an end in itself."⁴⁶⁶ Höbelt points to a lack of optimism even if victory was to be achieved, and a certain reticence to paint the war in overly ideological terms.⁴⁶⁷ Inherent here is the awareness on the part of the junior member that they may be on the winning side, but they no longer captain the team, despite their seniority. Victory is no longer theirs alone, and was only possible through the superior firepower of the ally. Any outcome, therefore, contains at least a kernel of defeat and subjugation; a positive outcome would reinforce the junior partner's junior status. The Sixtus peace attempts are the direct result of this ambivalence. The course they took might be seen as an attempt to circumvent the traditional dichotomy of winners and losers, to accept Austria-Hungary's junior status for what it was, and pull it out of the orbit of its stronger ally.

A Valid Peace Attempt?

How Might the Sixtus Brief Have Succeeded?

After careful assessment of both the Sixtus Brief and the circumstances surrounding it, the reasons for the attempt and the reasons for its failure are fairly evident. Although it is not the intent of this thesis to postulate what could have happened, it is nevertheless worth exploring what circumstances might have resulted in a favorable outcome for Karl and Sixtus. As the failure of the attempts center most noticeably on the issues of Italy and of Austria-Hungary's ability to negotiate with Entente powers in the first place, solutions to these problems could presumably have paved the way for an Austro-Hungarian exit from the war. Moreover, these two issues were fixable, though this would have required substantial concessions and

⁴⁶⁴ Höbelt, *Former Masters Playing Second Fiddle*, 120.

⁴⁶⁵ Höbelt, *Former Masters Playing Second Fiddle*, 123f.

⁴⁶⁶ Höbelt, *Former Masters Playing Second Fiddle*, 124.

⁴⁶⁷ Höbelt, *Former Masters Playing Second Fiddle*, 124.

flexibility on the part of the Austro-Hungarian Kaiser. Had these issues been solved, peace would not necessarily have been guaranteed. Further barriers to Austria-Hungary's exit may have sprung up, however perhaps it is possible to build a basis on which Austria-Hungary might have been able to conclude peace. It seems unlikely that success would result from a literal interpretation of the terms outlined in the Sixtus Brief, though the Brief itself constitutes an important starting point. Austria-Hungary's peace would presumably build upon this basis of stated willingness to work with the Entente, which would inspire necessary interest in the cause.

In the first scenario, pacification of Italy leads to Austria-Hungary's separate peace. This could follow one of two formats, or take elements of both. The Entente, realizing that it is about to lose its main geographical advantage over Germany due to the Russian Revolution, decides to keep Germany isolated by removing its most important ally. If Austria-Hungary could contemplate breaking the *Nibelungentreue* in the Sixtus Brief, it stands to reason that France and England could have betrayed Italy in the interests of concluding peace with the Habsburgs. Czernin for one believed in the spring of 1917 that France and England might be induced to give some ground on the Treaty of London⁴⁶⁸. This would have resulted in a separate peace for Austria-Hungary, in the interests of weakening Germany. Alternately, Austria-Hungary could have proved its dedication to the cause by ceding territory to Italy of its own volition.

The scenario of granting Italian territorial wishes is less plausible, as it puts Austria-Hungary in an even more vulnerable position than the attempt at peace already does. Unlikelier still would be Austria-Hungary's ability to match the Entente's offer in the secret Treaty of London in 1915. Could, perhaps, the Entente mediate an Austro-Italian peace that would quell Austro-Hungarian fears of irredentism? Herein lies the question of Entente initiative and motivation: what would motivate French and English diplomats to do this, as neither Austria-Hungary nor Italy constituted a direct interest. Such action might plausibly spring from Italian war-weariness, and perhaps even fear of their own resources being drained by an

⁴⁶⁸ Czernin reasons that if a general peace were concluded without a reassessment of the Treaty of London, Austria-Hungary alone would have to give territorial concessions. *Czernin, Im Weltkrieg*, 198.

ally unable to pull its own weight.⁴⁶⁹ Any initiative taken on the part of the Entente would be done in consideration of the ultimate goal: to defeat Germany. Should an end to the Austro-Italian war be deemed conducive to the realization of this goal, it seems likely that the Entente would have attempted it. This scenario ultimately flounders on the actual course taken by the Entente. The lack of a serious attempt to resolve the conflict demonstrates that Great Britain and France did not see a resolution to the alpine war as furthering their own interests.

Another possibility for removing the barriers to peace might have had Karl's original sentiment at its core. As discussed in the previous chapter, Karl intended the mission as the beginnings of a general peace offer, whereas Sixtus presented the note as a separate peace. While a separate peace was doubtless the more modest option, a general peace attempt in which Karl took on the role of a mediator would have addressed several key criteria. A general peace would not have technically violated the terms of the Austro-German alliance,⁴⁷⁰ it would be of immediate interest to all parties, and it would have addressed the stated Entente objection to the December 12th note, namely that the terms for peace were not mentioned.⁴⁷¹ Such a bold and admittedly risky move would have placed Austria-Hungary on middle ground between the Entente and Germany – dangerous territory, but perhaps the empire's only hope.⁴⁷² Austria-Hungary had declined in relative importance as the Entente-Germany conflict grew ever more bitter, and a peace attempt that, rather than letting it slip off into neutrality, instead raised its international profile, would simultaneously function as an argument for its own indispensability on the Continent. Austria-Hungary ultimately did not choose to lay all its cards on the table, it did not opt for all-or-nothing. Sixtus assessed

⁴⁶⁹ Italy was, however, less dependent on its allies than was Austria-Hungary, at least until the devastating defeat they suffered at Caporetto in the fall of 1917.

⁴⁷⁰ Although both empires were allowed to conduct negotiations without informing the other, Austria-Hungary's violation of German war aims in the Sixtus Brief is a critical flaw. This might have been somewhat excusable should Karl assume the mantle of a "Vermittler," as he could claim he was suggesting concessions on the part of the Central Powers.

⁴⁷¹ Entente Reply to German Proposals, 29. 12. 1916. In: James Brown Scott (Hg.), *Official Statements of War Aims and Peace Proposals: December 1916-November 1918* (Washington 1921) 26-28, here 26.

⁴⁷² In his essay "Disintegration and Defeat: The Austro-Hungarian Revolution," Mark Cornwall claims "a policy of weak compromise or indecision was the worst possible one to adopt during wartime among subjects already depressed by the economic hardships and war-weariness." Although his intended target is in this context internal reform, this could also apply to Karl's foreign policy. On a variety of levels, it seems, decisive action by the sovereign needed to be taken and Karl proved himself either too cautious, too idealistic, or too unfocussed to be able to stay a course. *Cornwall, Disintegration and Defeat*, 169.

the situation as more favorable to modesty, and presented the seemingly safer option, which relied in part on the belief that the Dual Monarchy was worthy enough of preservation to warrant a special effort. Arguably, Austria-Hungary needed to *make* itself important to have any chance of surviving the war and the best chance to create a role for itself in the European balance of power may have been to push whole-heartedly for a Habsburg-mediated general peace. On his part, Karl elected to keep more than one option open that spring, a decision for which he can hardly be faulted.

“Validity”

In examining the circumstances surrounding the failure of the Sixtus Brief, we come back to the questions posed at the beginning of this chapter, namely, if it could be considered valid and if it had any chance of success. To these, a third is added: does it need to have had the possibility of succeeding in order to be considered valid? An analysis of the validity of the Sixtus proposals will be inherently subjective, as the terminology itself invites individual interpretation. Furthermore, there is little scholarly consensus on the issue and even less discussion of the Sixtus proposals as divorced from Karl’s general record of failure as Kaiser of Austria-Hungary. A discussion of the “validity” of the Sixtus Brief can be a discussion of its workability, but is perhaps better conceptualized as a discussion of what it was responding to and how. Whether it had any real chance of success is another issue, and one that reaches far beyond the Sixtus negotiations in scope, concerning Austria-Hungary’s chances for surviving the war in general.

It appears there was little Austria-Hungary could have done by 1917 or even before to avert its relative decline as a Continental power and likelihood of falling under either Entente or German domination. At least in regard to Habsburg interests, the war should have been over, as they had successfully held off or defeated their foes. Peace was being discussed on many levels and by many different actors, from the Meinlgruppe to the American president. Yet the Habsburg emperor, who himself desired peace, found the traditional ways out to be blocked. Germany clearly disregarded the interests of its weaker partner, as evidenced by the December 1916 note and its aftermath, and on the other side, the Entente’s response to the peace attempt included a threat to dismember the empire. In response to increasing pressure from within, Austria-Hungary needed to radically chart a course out of the conflict,

alternately staying clear of or soliciting the good graces of its predatory neighbors. The Sixtus negotiations tried to work with the signals Austria-Hungary was being given; the prince's failure resulted more than anything from a lose-lose situation. In this sense, it is possible to argue that the Sixtus Brief was a valid peace attempt in the sense that it was a logical response, while admitting that its chance of success was low.

Had Karl made a serious effort to resolve the Italian issue, the Sixtus attempt might have been the ultimate declaration of Habsburg willingness to do anything to exit the war. However, his stubbornness on Italy should not invalidate the entire Sixtus mission. Even though Austria-Hungary feared for its very survival, it could not afford to put all its effort towards one possible outcome. The line between a ceasefire and invasion was thin. As had already been demonstrated in December 1916, willingness to open peace negotiations could easily be interpreted by an opponent as a sign of weakness. No one could afford to push wholeheartedly for peace at any price, save perhaps Wilson, who until February 1917 was officially neutral. The case of the Sixtus negotiations show this need to keep options open, particularly in the case of Italy. Even though Sixtus repeatedly pushed Karl to make concessions, the emperor proved unwilling to give up any chance for success on the Italian front, presumably due to the popularity of this particular conflict.

Rather than pure stubbornness on the part of the Habsburg emperor, there is in his reticence to cede territory a desire to assert in some way an Austro-Hungarian credibility and international presence. *Friede um jeden Preis* could too easily mean giving up his entire empire. The Sixtus attempt could be faulted for the Kaiser's ultimate lack of resolve, yet from a realistic – if pessimistic – assessment of the international situation, doing everything to pursue a peace along the lines of Sixtus' ideas would have been incredibly risky. The Sixtus Brief was simply one course that tried to bring Austria-Hungary out of the war, and Karl's consideration of other interests adds to, rather than detracts from the seriousness of this particular attempt. Austria-Hungary was in a precarious position. As the events of 1916 demonstrate, from the creation of the Oberste Kriegsleitung to the subordinate role the k. u. k. Monarchy played in the December peace note, Austria-Hungary was in very real danger of becoming a German satellite state. Not only did this prospect threaten the Austro-Hungarian self-image, but it also made the empire vulnerable on two fronts. Should Germany prove

victorious in the world war, it might take over Austria-Hungary, as it virtually controlled the Dual Monarchy's economy and military. The closer Austria-Hungary got to Germany, the more dispensable it became in the eyes of the Entente. For Austria-Hungary to have a chance at getting out of the war in one piece, it needed to demonstrate to the rest of the world that it was not entirely beholden to Germany. Likewise, Austria-Hungary stood increasingly under direct threat of dismemberment at the hands of the Entente. As voices for national self-determination grew stronger, the Entente would eventually resort to using them to its advantage. If Austria-Hungary could not prove its worth to France and England as a vital part of the Continental balance of power, defeat would mean its destruction.

The Sixtus Brief responded, if imperfectly, to all of these issues. This may indeed be its greatest flaw. It attempts to protect Austro-Hungarian territorial integrity in Italy, to diverge from and in fact completely oppose German interests regarding Alsace-Lorraine in order to prove its autonomy, and to either drop out early from a war it started or align itself with the enemy made it untenable. But these considerations do not make it invalid, only unsuccessful. The Sixtus Brief might perhaps be seen as an astute response to various pressures, but incapable of producing change - by no fault of its own. It was a peace feeler, an attempt to test a hypothesis – that Austria-Hungary might break with the *Mitteleuropa* concept and align itself with the Western Entente – and the hypothesis was proven wrong. It was, however, not disproved on the basis of its tenability, but on overwhelmingly negative circumstances, for which it had no antidote. Only with the benefit of hindsight is it possible to see that dynastic diplomacy was becoming less relevant and less effective. The assumptions that the Austro-Hungarian high command based their missive on constituted an inaccurate assessment of the situation, and an overestimation of the empire's importance and role in the European balance of power. Sixtus did not succeed, his attempt was indeed flawed, but failure was in many ways a foregone conclusion. That the Austro-Hungarian Kaiser and his brother-in-law either did not know this or did not want to know this and thereby constructed an educated guess at a peace attempt, supports a fairer and perhaps more charitable assessment of this episode in Habsburg diplomatic history.

CONCLUSION

Wie Prinz Sixtus als Franzose in dem Zusammengehen der Monarchie mit dem Deutschen Reich eine Stärkung der feindlichen preußischen Macht erblickte, so besorgte Erzherzog Karl – und gewiss mit vollem Recht – dass das deutsche Bündnis im günstigsten Fall eines Siegs der Mittelmächte sich, wenn auch nicht formell, so doch tatsächlich in ein Vasallenverhältnis der Habsburger zu den Hohenzollern, Österreichs zu Deutschland, umwandeln und zu einer Vergewaltigung der nichtdeutschen Nationen in der Monarchie führen werde.⁴⁷³

The Sixtus peace attempts in the spring of 1917 presented an imperfect solution to a problem that was most likely impossible to solve. In November of 1916, Karl inherited an empire destined to lose a world war. Certain defeat did not, however, equate to certain destruction. His task was not to figure out a way to reverse Austro-Hungarian fortunes, but to mitigate the effects of the unsuccessful venture undertaken in 1914. Preservation of the empire, as well as his place at the head of it, were the only goals towards which the new Kaiser could realistically turn his energies. Austria-Hungary faced an unprecedented existential crisis, and as soon as any pretensions of a “short war” evaporated, its leaders could do nothing but try to slow down or stop an increasingly inevitable collapse. Within these desperate machinations, the Sixtus negotiations serve as a study in rationalization.

Rather than a random or last-ditch idea, the Sixtus negotiations were the culmination of pressures brought on by years of frustration. There had been friction in the alliance with Germany since before the war broke out, and this only intensified as respective aims of the two empires began to diverge. This alliance was no partnership of equals, nor did its members have all that much common ground, despite superficial similarities. They spoke the same language and intermittently subscribed to the vague concept of *Mitteleuropa*; they were as well bound to a fanciful concept of Germanic brotherhood. The German struggle for unification in the mid-19th century, though injurious to Austria, mattered little in the context of the world war. Austria-Hungary was virtually the only potential ally. However, the goals and trajectories of the rising young industrial power and the ancient multinational empire were vastly different. The alliance rested on assumptions of loyalty, yet it did not encompass common aims, or even common enemies. Everywhere stood the potential for one member of the alliance to undermine the other in its dealings with the outside world, lest it forgo its true

⁴⁷³ Polzer-Hoditz, Kaiser Karl, 319.

interests in the name of brotherhood. For Austria-Hungary, the prospects were dire. The alliance with Germany pointed to defeat regardless of the outcome of the war, as the Entente would destroy Germany's ally if it won, and suspicions that Germany might take over Austria-Hungary should it win were widespread and not unfounded. The western Entente powers presented a more ambivalent picture to Austria-Hungary. There existed no conflict of direct interests, and any calls for dismemberment of Austria-Hungary on the part of the Entente were contingent on its continued alliance with Germany. As the war situation worsened, Austria-Hungary found itself increasingly alone.

In a sense, Austria-Hungary had already been taken over by Germany. It relied heavily upon its ally to make material ends meet on the home front, and seemed unable to pull off a military victory without German "corset stays" reinforcing its ranks. Austria-Hungary was militarily and financially deeply indebted to the German Empire, but at the same time could not consider a closer union with its partner for fear of losing what remained of its autonomy. The idea of becoming a mere satellite of Wilhelmine Germany, while perhaps in keeping with Austria-Hungary's comparative decline, constituted a serious threat to the identity of the multinational empire. As Austria-Hungary fought off irredentist activities along its borders and struggled to hold on to its various peoples, it could not afford the resentment engendered by closer ties to Germany, which emphasized Austro-German and Magyar dominance in the empire. Germany, it seemed, represented an ideology as dangerous to the empire's integrity in its own way as any support for national self-determination from the Entente.

If there ever was a chance to act boldly, the winter and spring of 1916/1917 was the time. Austria-Hungary had a new Kaiser, who brought in new ministers and visions for the future of the empire. The aftermath of the Central Powers note in December 1916 proved that the Entente was hell-bent on destroying Germany, and would destroy Austria-Hungary too, should the empire choose to stand with its ally. Germany matched the Entente in its desire for victory at any cost, and chose to resume unrestricted submarine warfare, regardless of the impact on neutral sympathies. The Russian Revolution toppled Tsar Nicholas II, sending out a warning to all European sovereigns involved in the war and removing the last common enemy that bound Austria-Hungary and Germany together. Germany could now concentrate its forces on defeating Britain and France; Austria-Hungary (with the help of German troops)

on Italy. Rather than bringing *Mitteleuropa* together in a focused drive for victory, separate opponents drove Austria-Hungary and Germany apart. Entente flirtations with a separate peace for Austria-Hungary and German ambivalence over Italy severely undermined whatever common ground the two empires still shared as the war entered its third year.

The terms on which Sixtus tried to negotiate did constitute an open betrayal of Germany. Yet Austria-Hungary's own interests were drastically undermined by its alliance, and betrayal in various forms had taken place on both sides. Certainly Austria-Hungary was not going to forget the initial German position on Italy, nor would it forget being left essentially on its own at the beginning of the war to hold back the massive Russian offensive.⁴⁷⁴ In this instance, it had put itself on the line to defend a common interest of the alliance and been broken in the attempt. Granted, in the ensuing years, Austria-Hungary would receive heavy German reinforcement, but in the histrionic terms of wartime politics, it had acted more to further the aims of the alliance than in pursuit of its own goals. By this token, the 'brash' terms of the Sixtus Brief are not so startling. Austria-Hungary was after all risking utter destruction by remaining in a war in which it had little interest, and was basically fighting to maintain the status quo on its Italian border. Germany had openly pushed it to concede territory in conflicts considered by the Habsburgs to be of existential importance. What was Alsace-Lorraine to Germany, an empire which, unlike Austria-Hungary, could afford to lose this war and survive? Germany was not fighting against the threat of territorial dissolution, it fought to win rather than to stay whole. Surely it could afford to cede territory far more than Austria-Hungary.

Considerable evidence weighed in favor of Austro-Hungarian deflection to the other side. The Entente had thus far shown itself resistant to the machinations of exile leaders who pushed to dismember Austria-Hungary along ethno-linguistic lines. Lloyd George himself indicated considerable sympathy to the Austro-Hungarian cause. The fact that although relations between Austria-Hungary and the United States were broken off after the United States declared war on Germany on April 6th, 1917, a state of war between the two powers did not ensue until December of that year also sent a strong signal. Wilson endeavored to

⁴⁷⁴ Austro-Hungarian preparations for war concentrated heavily on defeating Serbia; it was not until the beginning of August made known by Moltke to Conrad that Germany would depend on Austria-Hungary holding off the Russian offensive alone. *Shanafelt, The Secret Enemy*, 43.

keep his options open regarding Austria-Hungary, an action which did not go unnoticed by the beleaguered empire. Amidst very real fears of German takeover regardless of who would win the actual conflict, there was a strong case to be made that Austria-Hungary would be safer on the side of the Entente. By 1917, it was hardly a power to be reckoned with from a military standpoint; the question concerned constructing a postwar Europe far more than winning the present war. The war, at least as far as Austria-Hungary was concerned, was already lost. Maintaining the status quo ante constituted a positive outcome and deflecting or slipping into neutrality was the best chance they had to achieve it.

Whatever the eventual outcome, the Austro-Hungarian decision makers could not sit back and do nothing. As politicians and allies, they were obligated to act, and there was little else they could do but 'fight' to the bitter end, at the very least in an attempt to perpetuate the empire and thereby their own relevance. They had virtually admitted defeat to Germany at the end of 1916, but were bound to remain in the war. Defeat, on those terms, meant material exhaustion. It did not mean that Austria-Hungary was no longer an integral part of the European balance of power. This was what its politicians fought for after all hope of victory was lost, and this, more than anything else, was dependent on the whims of the Entente.

Even with the benefit of hindsight, it is impossible to recommend a course for Austria-Hungary in 1917. The Sixtus attempts seem at first glance ridiculous, but there existed no better alternative. It was a bold move in terms of alliance politics and it represented a bold vision for Austria-Hungary's place in a postwar world. The audacity of its terms as well as the direct involvement of the Kaiser make it stand out from other attempts as the last diplomatic flailing of a moribund construct. Yet audacity was its selling point and its only chance for success. Arguably, its greatest flaw was modesty – the separate peace presented by Sixtus made the empire more dispensable than an insistence on mediating a general peace would have.

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LEBENS LAUF

Sara R. Friedman
einundsiebzigersrf@gmail.com

EDUCATION

Universität Wien, Vienna, Austria

Masterstudium Geschichte der Neuzeit (Modern History) expected November 2013

M.A. Thesis: „Friede um jeden Preis? Experiences, Preconceptions, and Realities in the Failed Austro-Hungarian Peace Attempt in Spring 1917” – A description and rationalization of the process that went into the decision of Kaiser Karl and Prince Sixtus to attempt secret peace negotiations with the Entente in 1917 and why these failed. Advisor: Professor Lothar Höbelt

Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, Vienna, Austria.

Masters in Advanced International Studies, June 2011.

GPA: 3.6/4.0

M.A. Thesis: “The Sixtus Affair and the End of Dynastic Diplomacy” – Contextualizing the consequences of the Sixtus Affair within the transition from “old” to “new” diplomacy at the end of the First World War. Advisors: Professor Thomas Row and Professor David Hadley

University of Chicago, Chicago, IL.

Double B.A. with honors in History and Germanic Studies, June 2009.

GPA: 3.4/4.0, Dean’s List 2005-2006, 2007-2008, 2008-2009

Major GPA History: 3.6/4.0; Major GPA Germanic Studies 3.8/4.0

B.A. Thesis: “Loyalty Without a Goal: The Use of Hagen von Tronje as a Germanic Metonymic Symbol” – Examining the use of the *Nibelungenlied* character Hagen von Tronje in literature, art, film, and politics in Germany and Austria from Germany’s unification to the rise of the Third Reich. Advisors: Professors Michael Geyer (History) and David Levin (Germanic Studies)

Freie Universität International Summer Program, Berlin, Germany

Intermediate German, Summer 2007

Horizonte Institut für Sprache, Kommunikation, und Kultur, Regensburg, Germany

Intensive Intermediate German, Summer 2007

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Professor William Veeder, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois

Research Assistant

Researched and presented to the professor historical information regarding turn-of-the century San Francisco for a historical novel. Required efficient collecting of data and identification of relevant material, extensive use of archives, and own background knowledge of the San Francisco Bay Area and its history.

2007-2008

HONORS AND AWARDS

Fulbright Research Grant Alternate to Austria, 2009-2010

University of Chicago Merit Scholarship, 2005-2009

Foreign Language Acquisition Grant, 2007 (German)

National Achievement Scholar, 2005

PRESENTATIONS

“Loyalty without a Goal: Hagen von Tronje as a Germanic Metonymic Symbol”, University of Chicago History Spring Symposium, Chicago, IL, 2009

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

“Frei von Zwängen: Eine Amerikanerin in Österreich” co-written with Ernst Schmiederer, *Die Zeit*, June 14, 2012

“Worlds Apart? The Many Jewish Viennas: Vienna’s small Jewish community is silently thriving. More and more diverse, its relationship to wider society is still contested”, *The Vienna Review*, April 2012

“Generation Praktikum Heads into the Real World: A new study casts a light on the legal shadow world of internships in Austria, as graduates work for free with few prospects”, *The Vienna Review*, September 2011

“Honored Dead: Amidst the theatre of Otto Habsburg’s funeral, the real man was harder to find”, co-written with Chief Editor Dardis McNamee, *The Vienna Review*, September 2011

“Music and Morals”, *Polemics: The Magazine of the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna*, March 2011

LANGUAGE SKILLS

Near-native reading, speaking, and written ability in German

Reading competency in French