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The Undermining of Austria-Hungary: the Battle for Hearts and Minds

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In reviewing Mark Cornwall's monumental study of 'front propaganda by and against the Habsburg Monarchy in the First World War, I feel I ought to register a certain personal interest. In the summer of 1982, when I was embarking on my own doctoral research in the Vienna archives, I ran into Roy Bridge, leading expert in the diplomatic history of Austria-Hungary. Roy, always the soul of kindness, introduced me to Mark, one of his postgraduate students, whom he was initiating into the mysteries of the Haus-Hof- und Staatsarchiv, and who was remarkable (in my experience) for having a working acquaintance with both Serbo-Croat and Hungarian as well as German. For the last week or so of my stay that year, as I remember, Mark and I worked alongside one another in that peaceful little backroom of the *Ballhaus*. Together we also weathered an evening in the *Zwölfapostelkeller* with the unsinkable Dr. Bridge. The following summer, when I next visited Vienna, Mark was still there, having spent an entire year mining the archives, interspersed with forays into Hungary and former Yugoslavia in search of additional sources. A couple of years later I heard of Mark working under Zbynek Zeman and learning Czech into the bargain. In the course of the last decade and a half he has consolidated his reputation with an edited collection of articles on the break-up of the Habsburg Monarchy, and a string of solidly-crafted periodical articles on a wide range of subjects in and about his period.

I mention all this because it is a strange sensation reviewing a book at whose inception one was, after a fashion, present, for the current study is the product of Mark Cornwall's years of postgraduate toil in the

archives of Central Europe. This is not to the book's discredit, but rather the contrary. Most transmogrified PhD theses, like Frankenstein's monster, show some signs of their origin, with a bolt sticking out here, the odd bit of stitching there, and a certain jerkiness in their mode of progression. There is none of that here. *The Undermining of Austria-Hungary* is a meticulously tidy, balanced and up-to-date piece of research, which in fact constitutes the best proof of why doing a PhD is the ultimate training for an historian. Like all former PhDs, it is enormously detailed; unlike many, the detail at no point obscures the overall story that is being told here, or the point of it all.

To cut to the chase: the subject of this book is the role played by propaganda in the demise of the Habsburg Monarchy, specifically in the last two years of the First World War, and specifically in the form of 'front propaganda', that is, material aimed directly at the front-line troops of one's opponents. It is a complicated topic, not least because the Monarchy was both a practitioner as well as a target of this type of offensive activity. After clearing the ground with a general discussion of propaganda, and an excellent chapter (of which more shortly) on the overall challenge facing Austria-Hungary in the War, Mark deals first with the Monarchy as practitioner, in two chapters on the propaganda campaigns against tsarist (later Bolshevik) Russia and Italy. The core of the book, however, is in the four huge chapters on the origins and course of the campaign waged by the Italians against the Monarchy in 1917-18. There is a wrap-up chapter showing how things unravelled for the Monarchy, in propaganda terms, in the fall of 1918; and a conclusion in which an attempt is made to gauge the contribution front propaganda made to the final disintegration.

Even as bald a summary as the above must give some idea of the wealth of sources, primary and secondary, on which this study necessarily rests. Mark has diligently trawled through the main Austrian archives, especially the War Archive, with its records from Army High Command down to regimental level. In Zagreb he has consulted the Croatian State Archive, but also the Archive of the Yugoslav Academy, which houses the crucially important papers of the Yugoslav Committee, the wartime assortment of South Slav *émigrés* who worked for the Habsburg Monarchy's destruction. Repositories in the Czech Republic have been pillaged for similar material, notably the papers of the Czechoslovak National Council. The Hungarian Military History Institute and the National Military History Museum have been used, particularly the latter's propaganda leaflet collection. And in Britain it is hard to imagine anything of significance which has been left out, from the Public Record Office to the Imperial War Museum, from the Northcliffe papers in the British Library to R.W. Seton-Watson's papers in the School of Slavonic & East European Studies.

A special mention should be made while on the subject of sources, of the sheer range of published material consulted, whether secondary, memoir or printed primary. Many of the most valuable insights of the book are derived from recently published collections of letters, diaries and so on, as well as recent scholarly monographs, many of them in Italian, Czech, Hungarian and other languages. Thus, the papers of Gaetano Salvemini, published in 1984, and those of Umberto Zanotti-Bianco (1987), have been used to good effect to amplify the story of Italy's propaganda campaign. Equally valuable are the eight-volume memoirs of the Slovene officer-deserter turned Allied propagandist, Ljudevit Pivko, and which appeared only ten years ago. Due account is taken of recent work in the general field of propaganda by scholars such as Ute Daniel, Wolfram Siemann, Maria Masau Dan and others. Altogether, by my reckoning Mark has utilised material in no fewer than nine different languages (not eight as intimated on Macmillan's dust-jacket). Even by the standards of the average Austria-Hungary freak, where this sort of polyglot catholicity is always prized and, to some extent, taken for granted, such conscientiousness surely sets some kind of record.

As far as content is concerned, what specific theses emerge from this massive exercise in empirical enquiry? Two in particular seem to me to stand out, and constitute the most original part of Mark's research. One is the centrality, as well as the autonomy, of the Italian effort in the propaganda war against Austria-Hungary. It is one of the central revelations of the book that, while the contributors to this offensive were eventually drawn from all the main Allied countries, and many of the Monarchy's own nationalities, the direction of it was very much an Italian affair. This amounts to yet another nail in the coffin of the 'Crewe House myth', the impression conveyed after the First World War by many of those involved in the British propaganda operation, such as Henry Wickham Steed, that 'Northcliffe propaganda' had been the main element in the Allied effort. More the product of wishful retrospective thinking than historical reality, the Crewe House

myth was nevertheless accepted at face value not only by many in the West, but also by former German and Austro-Hungarian military and political leaders. The belief in an underhand and all-pervasive Allied subversion, masterminded by the Northcliffe press from perfidious Albion, was for many in the defeated countries, Hitler included, obviously more acceptable as an explanation of their downfall. That it was accepted for so long in the West is attributable, as Mark Cornwall shows, in part to the unwillingness of the Fascist regime in Italy to acknowledge propaganda, seen as somehow unmanly and dishonourable, as an important weapon in Italy's wartime arsenal. But it is also due to the inaccessibility, to Western scholars, of many of the key accounts of the propaganda conducted under Italian leadership, since so much of this literature is in Polish, or Czech, or Slovene. Unlocking this treasure-trove of evidence is one of the most noteworthy achievements of this book.

The second main contribution of the book is one that the author himself puts forward with some diffidence, but which I think is clear from the evidence offered. This is that, given certain caveats, and in a limited sense, the front propaganda against the Habsburg Monarchy worked. Of course, it took a long time for the leafleting campaigns, which is what most front propaganda amounted to, to show any obvious effects. As Mark is at pains to show, one of the great difficulties in measuring the effect of any propaganda, both at the time and with historical hindsight, is whether it was even read by its targets; given the questionable literacy of many Austro-Hungarian army conscripts, this is an important qualification. Leaflets picked up were often being harvested on the orders of commanders, anxious to limit their spread. Nor is it clear that many soldiers deserted to the Allies as a direct result of front propaganda, although some undoubtedly did. But the crucial factor, which is well brought out in this book, is that this steady, and increasingly sophisticated, psychological pressure was "pushing at an open door" (p. 439). It is a key requirement of any propaganda that it should fall on ground already fertile; and in this respect the Habsburg Monarchy in 1917-18 was a rich field. The multinational nature of the Monarchy meant that fighting a sustained war would always be a strain; the worse conditions got, the more likely dissent at home, on national grounds, was to appear. One of the most interesting aspects of this book is its demonstration of how, as political discontent in the Monarchy widened, and surfaced increasingly in a (relatively) open press, the propagandists in the Italian High Command started feeding this open criticism back to the Monarchy's troops *via* leaflets in multiple languages. It is also a truism that, for propaganda to work, there ought to be some kernel of truth, however small or distorted, embedded in it. Thus, when the military and political combination of circumstances were just right, in the fall of 1918, the constant barrage of front propaganda acted as a catalyst in prompting the literal disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Army. Although the vast majority of troops had obeyed orders and fought stubbornly for four years, there was no denying their divided loyalties. In this battle for hearts and minds, as Mark calls it, the Monarchy was bound to end up the loser if stretched far enough.

With regard to the substance of individual chapters, there is far more detail than can adequately be described even in the generous space allowed by ***Reviews in History***. The second chapter, on "Austria-Hungary and the Control of Wartime Morale", is especially valuable as an analysis of the general dilemma facing the Monarchy. The hostilities presented the Monarchy itself with a clear opportunity to use propaganda against such vulnerable enemies as tsarist Russia and Italy; but the fact remained that the Monarchy was equally if not more vulnerable, given the existence of irredentist nation-states among its enemies, and claiming kinship with minorities in Austria-Hungary. Even more striking, however, is the extent to which the perception of vulnerability by authorities within the Monarchy shaped attitudes towards both the domestic population and the fighting troops. In their attempt to monitor and stamp out suspected subversion the civilian and military authorities exacerbated the disaffection which already existed among some nationalities, and arguably created it among other peoples where it had not hitherto been evident. Mark ably sketches the various organs created in each half of the Monarchy for this surveillance, and why ultimately they were likely to fail, especially once the political situation was gradually liberalised following the accession of the Emperor Charles. The military spin-off from this is also well told, in particular the vain attempt to counter the disaffection of soldiers from suspect nationalities by creating an increasing number of nationally mixed regiments, a solution which in terms of simple military efficiency was no solution at all.

The in-depth discussion of the Italian propaganda campaign (chapters 5-8), as mentioned, is the core of the

book. Precisely because they are so detailed, these are a bit of a stiff read, though at all times clearly written, and mercifully free of jargon. There is in fact a great deal of interest here, from the expert analysis of Italy's wartime policy towards Austria-Hungary through to the often blow-by-blow description of individual incidents and phases of the propaganda war. One of the factors that makes the Italian campaign so intriguing is that, contrary to what many might imagine, the Italian government was not anxious to play the 'nationalities card' against the Habsburg Monarchy. Despite the agitation of irredentist nationalists, Italian policy, as enshrined in the secret Treaty of London of 1915, was essentially aimed at territorial expansion for its own sake; embracing the principle of national self-determination would necessitate renouncing territory much of which was inhabited by South Slavs. Mark is especially interesting on the resulting tensions in Italian front propaganda. On the one hand there were a dedicated number of soldiers, politicians and publicists who perceived the utility of being able to call on all the Monarchy's nationalities to question their allegiance to the Habsburgs. On the other hand, official Italian policy, as represented by the uneasy partnership of Vittorio Emanuele Orlando and Sidney Sonnino, took a long time to endorse the aspirations even of Czechs and Slovaks and Poles, and refused to the end fully to support the creation of a Yugoslavia. As Mark shows, this did not prevent the Italian propaganda machine from recruiting personnel from almost all the Monarchy's 'subject' nationalities, including South Slavs; but it did lead to unresolved differences and, in the particular case of propaganda aimed specifically at South Slav units, left an indelible question-mark hanging over its effectiveness.

In a book this long it would not be surprising if there were some minor errors of detail, not least in the voluminous notes appended to each chapter; but I have to say that I spotted none, with the piffling exception of an article (by Ivo Banac), which is referred to in chapter 5 (note 7), but is not listed in the bibliography.

The only two criticisms I can think of are also minor. Firstly: The opening chapter, "A Theory of Front Propaganda", strikes me as inaptly titled. If there is a theory of front propaganda being propounded here, even a nascent one, I don't see much evidence of it. Instead, this chapter offers, quite properly, a rationale for the research undertaken, and a very clear historiographical rundown of the literature on this subject, including some of the pioneering works on First World War propaganda such as that by Sanders and Taylor. Mark convincingly demonstrates here the originality of his work: there simply has not been until now any detailed study of either the Italian or the East European dimensions of front propaganda in this period, for the reasons alluded to earlier. What is more, Mark's book usefully corrects some of the mistaken interpretations about the leading role of the British in this field of warfare perpetuated by Sanders and Taylor themselves. None of this, however, constitutes a theory of front propaganda, nor is this any bad thing. Like all good historians, Mark has based his findings on solid, exhaustively detailed empirical research. He has not been overwhelmed by the evidence he has amassed, but has rather sifted it and compared it with previous work, as one should. Whether, at some point, and on the basis of his work to date, he wants to offer us a theory of how front propaganda works, is up to him. Personally, I think he could more profitably spend his time doing further research of this high quality. Personally (and to give 'history' its original meaning), I prefer the story to any theory. Precisely because of the human detail offered here, this is a very absorbing story indeed. It deserves to reach a wider audience than Macmillan's extortionate hardback prices will permit, so I devoutly hope a paperback edition is in the pipeline. Anyone interested in either the Habsburg Monarchy or the First World War will find this story a rewarding one.

Secondly, Mark has been ill-served by his publishers in one other respect, in that the quality and number of maps allotted to a study of this nature is scandalous. Given the detailed narrative in much of the book, a few general maps of the politico-military situation, but even more a series of large-scale front-line charts, would have made the whole thing much easier to follow. Call me simple-minded, but I for one like to know where I'm going. One can do without pictures (although the reproductions in this book of individual propaganda leaflets and cartoons are an excellent bonus), but it is infernally difficult to imagine even general historical events without maps. All the more important, then, to supply a military study like this with the right equipment.

To sum up on a more positive note: *The Undermining of Austria-Hungary* puts me in mind of that anecdote at the start of C.A. Macartney's magisterial history of the Habsburg Monarchy, where he relates commenting

on the absence of such a history to A.F. Pribram in the 1920s, and being told that 'everyone' noticed the gap, but gave up trying it themselves because they 'didn't have eleven languages'. (I paraphrase.) Not only does Mark Cornwall have the answer to the Pribram test, but also he has told a complex story well, and illuminated a hitherto only dimly understood aspect of the First World War.

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