

# H-Diplo

## H-Diplo Review Essay

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*H-Diplo has commissioned reviews of the Makers of the Modern World Series (Haus Publishing), which concerns the Peace Conferences of 1919-23 and their aftermath. The 32 volumes are structured as biographies in standard format or as specific national/organizational histories.*  
<http://www.hauspublishing.com/product/229>

### H-Diplo Review Essay of:

**Jamie Bulloch. *Karl Renner: Austria, Makers of the Modern World series*. London:** Haus Publishing, 2009. x+198pp. Maps, photographs, notes, chronology, bibliography, index. £12.99, \$19.95 (cloth). ISBN 978-1-905791-89-7.

**Bryan Cartledge. *Mihály Károlyi and István Bethlen: Hungary, Makers of the Modern World series*. London:** Haus Publishing, 2009. x+178pp. Maps, photographs, notes, chronology, bibliography, index. £12.99, \$19.95 (cloth). ISBN 978-1-905791-73-6.

**R. J. Crampton. *Aleksandŭr Stamboliŭski: Bulgaria, Makers of the Modern World series*. London:** Haus Publishing, 2009. xii+194pp. Map, photographs, notes, chronology, bibliography, index. £12.99, \$19.95 (cloth). ISBN 978-1-905791-77-4.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/PDF/Haus-Austria-Hungary-Bulgaria.pdf>

### Reviewed for H-Diplo by Gábor Bátonyi, University of Bradford

**T**o what extent were any leaders of the minor defeated countries at the time of the Paris Peace Conference 'Makers of the Modern World'? How do these historical figures fit into a 32-volume series about the peacemaking of 1919-1923 and its legacy? Reading the above three volumes certainly provides some insights into the long-term consequences of Entente victory in Central and Eastern Europe; yet the historical accomplishment of those unfortunate individuals who rose to prominence in the wake of military collapse, national humiliation, and territorial losses remains a moot point.

Arguably, the Austrian, Hungarian, and Bulgarian leaders had very little room for manoeuvre from 1919 to at least 1922. Their two most notable roles, namely to mitigate the peace terms and, at the same time, to make the public at home accept the unpalatable

new geopolitical realities, were doomed to failure from the outset. In Paris, the delegates from Austria, Hungary, and Bulgaria faced not only hostility, but also a rather ominous atmosphere of indifference. As the British official J. W. Headlam-Morley noted in March 1919: 'It is almost hopeless to attempt here to get any serious interest taken in Austria'.<sup>1</sup> Such unconcern led to much of the text of the Austrian treaty being lifted from the draft of the German one, with some notoriously comic results. The landlocked republic was 'forbidden to have submarines', and was forced 'to renounce all claims to, and titles in, Morocco, Egypt, China and Siam' (74). As for Hungary and Bulgaria, their respective fates exercised the peacemakers still less, if that were possible, even though the domestic political scene in both countries was increasingly turbulent and explosive. The first post-war administrations in Vienna, Budapest, and Sofia were short-lived and destined to collapse. Likewise, the political careers of several key statesmen there unravelled fast in the aftermath of the peacemaking in Paris. Clearly, the task faced by the defeated states and their leaders was not to make a new world, but to adapt to the existing one. For them, even this seemingly modest political objective proved difficult to attain.

The trio of titles reviewed here deals with four historical personalities from three vanquished states. At a glance, this is an odd collection of people who had very little in common. The 'red count', Mihály Károlyi, may have started on the same political path as Count István Bethlen, but he ended up on the diametrically opposite side, becoming the main detractor of the Hungarian 'white' regime abroad. But despite their political differences and personal animosity, these two scions of the old Hungarian nobility were a world apart from the humble life of Austrian social democrat Karl Renner, not to mention that of Bulgarian peasant politician Aleksandŕ Stamboliŕski. And yet, regardless of the contrast in political persuasion, social background, life experience, education, and temperament between the men, all of them were to play an equally important role in the chaotic and revolutionary days following the loss of the war. They were also to have an abiding impact on the history of their own nations, and on that of the wider region of Central and Eastern Europe. What is most striking, however, is that, of the four statesmen, three were to be losers from the peace, indeed victims of it, rather than beneficiaries of the new order.

Károlyi had already had to leave Hungary before the country's frontiers were redrawn. In 1919, his name was becoming synonymous with political failure and national disaster. Rightly or wrongly, the former Hungarian president was immediately blamed for all national ills, including the 133-day Bolshevik interlude from March of that year, and the territorial losses sanctioned by the Treaty of Trianon in June 1920. By the time the peace treaty was presented to Hungary, Károlyi was living in political exile. Within a few months,

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<sup>1</sup> James Wycliffe Headlam-Morley to Louis Namier, 5 March 1919, Headlam-Morley Papers, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge, HDLM ACC 688, Box 2.

Entente hostility towards Hungary completely broke his political career. His eventual political rehabilitation in his homeland, as a diplomat after 1945, was fleeting and inconsequential.

By comparison, the Austrian chancellor Renner, a wily political survivor, fared somewhat better. Provocatively, Jamie Bulloch describes him as “the founding father of both the First and Second Republics”, who “could claim to have been the second most important Austrian politician of the 20th century after Adolf Hitler” (159). Be that as it may, Renner’s political prestige and prospects were profoundly affected by his role in accepting the inevitable; his life in the limelight was largely curtailed, especially in the short term, by his subdued and Entente-friendly attitude at the Peace Conference. Although he issued an eloquent warning to the Entente powers not to endanger “their own triumph by loading a corpse onto the victory chariot” (79), his desperate attempts to show Austria to advantage yielded precious little reward. Consequently, he was to lose his hold on power within three years of appending his signature to the Treaty of St. Germain. In the interwar years, he became marginalised even within his own party. Whilst his return to life at the top of Austrian politics was not quite an accident, it was not a foregone conclusion either; he was in the right place at the right time. True, his sycophantic letter to Stalin, “thanking the Soviet Union profusely for having liberated his country from the Nazi yoke” (147), certainly helped to salvage his career. All the same, as Bulloch aptly puts it, Renner remained to the end of his life ‘a somewhat fugitive figure’ (161).

More calamitous was the plight of the Bulgarian premier. Not only was the government of Stamboliiski ousted by a coup in 1923, but the prime minister was also tortured to death by Macedonian extremists, who as a gruesome memento cut off the very hand that had signed the Treaty of Neuilly. Not that the agrarian leader himself had ever accepted the territorial settlement. R. J. Crampton quotes him as saying in 1919: ‘I signed the harsh treaty of peace in Paris because of my premonition which had hardened into conviction, that this treaty would not last more than three years’ (85). Stamboliiski kept on advocating patience; in the event, he lived just long enough to see his hopes dashed. Paradoxically, the very man who had been sentenced to hard labour for life in November 1915, and who had spent three years in prison for his vocal opposition to the war, turned out to be the most high-profile political victim of the peace. With hindsight, it is hardly surprising that in Hungary and Germany, no senior politician could be found to perform the pure formality of signing the respective peace treaties. Opponents of the war such as Károlyi, Renner, and Stamboliiski came to power in the vanquished states due to their belief, whether real or assumed, in the Wilsonian principles. Once their trust in the magnanimity and fairness of the victors proved to be misplaced, they quickly lost both their standing and their support base at home. They became political casualties, whipping boys, or fallen heroes, depending on one’s viewpoint, instead of the movers and shakers of the new Europe.

By stark contrast, the fourth personality, the cunning Transylvanian count Bethlen, managed to cling on to his premiership for a decade. After 1921, he represented the theme of stabilisation in Hungary. He earned a fair amount of praise for his ‘moderation’, especially in Britain. Even in the 1930s, he acted as ‘the grand old man’ of Hungarian politics, using his reputation abroad to bolster the legitimacy of Admiral Miklós Horthy’s

regime. Yet, once out of office, Bethlen was the most tireless advocate of revision, and one of the chief critics of the entire peace settlement. Hence, he was anything but a champion of the new world. Quite the contrary, he was at the forefront of the dogged revisionist efforts to remake the old world. On balance, therefore, it seems that none of the four individuals discussed here left much by way of a constructive international legacy.

All such conceptual problems aside, the inclusion of these three volumes in this extensive series is only to be welcomed. These titles are likely to prove more useful for students of peacemaking and the interwar period than others in this series, which depict well-known historical figures, such as Woodrow Wilson, Georges Clemenceau, and David Lloyd George. After all, there are no biographies in English of either Károlyi or Renner, and the literature on Stamboliiski is limited at best. The last scholarly work on him and his Bulgarian Agrarian National Union was published in English in 1977. The same cannot be said of Bethlen. He is one of the few influential politicians of interwar Hungary whose life and legacy have received scholarly attention and tolerable treatment since 1989. But even in his case, there is just one modern biography in English by Ignác Romsics. To this extent, these compact, accessible books may justifiably be said to fill something of a void in the English-language historical literature. One merely wishes that they were not textbooks, but weightier biographies.

To my mind, the best of the three volumes is Crampton's work on Stamboliiski's Bulgaria. Not only is it highly readable, but it also successfully combines a short history of the country, of which the author is a renowned British expert, with a sketchy but vivid biography. More to the point, the book grapples with the impact of the Treaty of Neuilly, and traces the historical roots of agrarian politics in Bulgaria and the wider region. This is a laudable feat in so few pages. Although the mix of elements makes the classification of this work a well-nigh impossible task, the various elements blend in very well. This is partly due to the writer's assured hand, but textual unity is no doubt aided, too, by the close link between the story of the country, the lasting national appeal of an ideology, and the fate of an individual. Stamboliiski, once described by Lord Curzon as "a stout-hearted patriot" (90), was not just another Eastern European nationalist figure; he was, in addition, a peasant revolutionary, an original thinker, and a champion of a Green International (a cooperation of peasant movements in Central and Eastern Europe). His unusual life story embodied most of the specific dilemmas and problems of Bulgarian social and national development. His career and destiny were tied to his attitude to the monarchy, the military, paramilitaries, and the issue of Macedonia, as much as to his role in presenting the Bulgarian case in Paris. For all his internationalist credentials, in a region characterised by a bitter struggle between red and white forces, his experimental agrarian regime was a uniquely Bulgarian phenomenon. Military defeat ushered in this 'green' regime; national humiliation brought it to an end. Quite apart from his horrific demise, Stamboliiski's ideals were very much rooted in Bulgarian tradition, and they survived until at least the Second World War and the communist takeover.

Bulloch's work on Renner is another unconventional piece, which is well written and concise, and as such it may appeal to undergraduate students and the non-specialist academic reader. In the author's words, "This volume is a biography of both Renner and

the country he served” (pp. vii–viii), and it deals with five crucial incarnations of Austria: as “(i) one half of the Habsburg Monarchy, (ii) the First Republic, (iii) the authoritarian “corporate” state, (iv) an integral part of Nazi Germany, and (v) the Second Republic” (vii). Inevitably, the coverage of these lengthy periods is uneven. Large tracts of the text, especially on the Habsburg heritage, the history of national conflict, or the collapse of the Dual Monarchy, are no more than brief surveys of the literature, likely to be familiar to all students of Austrian history. Nevertheless, the story of Renner’s life furnishes plenty of lesser-known, interesting, and entertaining material, together with some personal touches. As well as learning about the achievements and appeal of this “friendly but authoritative grandfatherly figure” (151), the reader is informed of his idiosyncrasies and weaknesses. Renner’s penchant for cigars and good food, notably his craving for “ham, bay leaves and pepper” (147), preoccupied him even in adversity, whether in near confinement as a delegate in Paris, during his three months in an Austrian prison in the spring of 1934, or throughout the privations of Soviet occupation. During a meeting with Red Army officers, he spotted a box of Austrian cigars, removed it, and quipped: “The expropriators must be expropriated” (147).

As these snippets suggest, there is more of a personal portrait here than in the other two titles. What may be missing, though, is a closer examination of the Renner myth, interrogating the apparent contradictions in this “man for all seasons” (vii). In particular, one would expect a more convincing explanation for his split identity, or duplicity, as manifested in his conflicting “Austrian patriotism” (158) and “German national feeling” (159) at the time of the Anschluss. Bulloch’s observation that Renner had a “strong sense of mission”, albeit “mixed with a dash of self-importance” (146), is evidence of the author’s perspicacity. Accordingly, one would like to know more of the success or failure of the mission. Still, considering the size and scope of this book, the reader can hardly expect a major reassessment of Renner’s legacy. Indeed, all three volumes suffer from similar constraints, most conspicuously in the case of Bryan Cartledge’s work, which contains not one but two biographies.

The volume on Hungary begins with an intriguing flashback to a fine summer’s day in 1896, when the “Hungarian nation was celebrating its Millennium”, and two subsequent prime ministers, “perspiring with their fellow nobles in full ceremonial dress” (viii), joined the colourful procession to the royal palace. The description is evocative, the opening inspired. The history of these two individuals is inextricably intertwined with the history of the land. And yet, the choice of these personalities, as part of this series, is far from self-evident. Above all, one questions the selection of Bethlen in the context of peacemaking. Although the comparison with Károlyi is undoubtedly apt, and it is one of the more original features of this book, neither politician was in government at the time when the Treaty of Trianon was concluded or when it was ratified. Arguably, another Transylvanian aristocrat, Count Pál Teleki, was more influential in preparing and presenting the Hungarian case in Paris than Bethlen. Moreover, it was Teleki’s premiership in 1920–1921 that laid the foundations of Hungary’s consolidation after the trauma of Trianon. A telling detail is that Teleki’s administration fell as a result of the political turmoil caused by Trianon, particularly the ensuing Habsburg restoration attempts. It was no accident that, for more than a decade and a half, the geographer–politician withdrew from politics, only returning during the Second

World War. The tragic end of his life in 1941, his suicide on the day when Hungary gave up the position of armed neutrality and joined the German attack on Yugoslavia, is probably the best and most symbolic example of the dead end reached by interwar Hungarian politics and revisionist endeavours.

Another obvious candidate for such a biography would have been Admiral Horthy. After all, rightly or wrongly, in the literature the whole interwar period of Hungarian history is commonly labelled as the 'Horthy era'. Cartledge describes the regent as "usually decent, sometimes stupid, rarely wicked", a politician "determined to restore the pre-revolutionary *status quo* and to arrest further change" (115). That is to say, he was hardly the ideal hero. Even so, the personal legacy of Horthy is uniquely associated with the memory of a historical epoch. In truth, I do not wish to quibble with Cartledge's choice of *dramatis personae*, which is perfectly reasonable. This is only to suggest that interwar Hungarian history is extremely difficult to relate in the context of one or even two life stories. The inevitable end result of such an undertaking is neither a biography, nor a discussion of the main themes of this ambitious series, but yet another concise history of Hungary.

There is no shortage of such surveys in English, and little coverage by them of the debates in Hungarian historiography. With differing emphasis, all of these works tend to recount the same story in the same chronological fashion. Apart from a few successful biographies, there have not been many attempts to engage with historical controversies and fault lines in the nation's memory. Cartledge's book gives a succinct and accurate narrative, despite such minor niggles as the repeated misspelling of Harold Nicolson's surname (as Nicholson) throughout the text. However, it scarcely moves on from earlier works, merely providing a synthesis of recent studies, including the author's own. Also notable is this title's reliance on nearly exclusively English sources.

Without a doubt, Cartledge makes some perceptive and trenchant observations. For example, in the epilogue, he returns to the theme of the Treaty of Trianon, highlighting how "The bitterness engendered by this avoidable injustice poisoned Hungarian politics between the two World Wars and fed the dark side of the Hungarian national psyche" (142). Elsewhere, he states that "Hungarians have a remarkable capacity for wishful thinking", adding that this was "perhaps a product of the fact that at so many junctures in their history it seemed incredible that matters could get any worse" (103). That said, such throwaway comments may be of scant help to the reader who is intent on comprehending the 'Trianon syndrome' or the peculiarities of the Hungarian national psyche. Possibly, though, this is not so much the author's fault, as a reflection of the general state of historical writing in English about 20th-century Hungary.

Overall, these three taut works are of varying quality. Still, they closely follow the same template, and they have some of the same conceptual problems and merits. All of them could be offered to undergraduate students, as useful short guides to peacemaking and interwar developments in the vanquished states. They are of value, too, in dispelling stubborn clichés about Germany as the principal victim of the peace, supposedly suffering from exceptionally harsh treatment by the victors. Above all, these books should be

commended for boldly introducing a quartet of colourful, influential, but little-known historical figures, who deserve more attention and fuller treatment by historians in the future.

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