



GEOPOLITICS OF CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE AND WORLD WAR I

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Abstract.

Central and Eastern Europe is a specific historical region which experienced the domination of the conservative dynasties such as the Romanovs (the Schleswig-Holstein-Gottorp's branch), the Hohenzollerns, the House of Habsburg (Habsburg-Lorraine) and the conservative systems of international relations, for instance, the Holy Alliance (*Heilige Allianz*), the League of the Three Emperors (*Drei-Kaiser-Abkommen*), etc. Starting with the Congress of Vienna until the outbreak of the First World War, the monarchical conservatism of the Russian and the Austrian Empires had resisted irredentism of the neighbouring nations and nationalism inside the empires. The old regime was able to retain itself due to the solidarity of the dynasties. However, the imperial rivalries in Central and Eastern Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, accompanied by the irredentism of the divided nations (sometimes even stimulated by the rivals) had eroded the solidarity of the monarchies. Before World War I, the balance of power in the region had been precarious in which Austria-Hungary played a certain role of a sui generis bulwark against Russian expansion into the Balkans. Thus, the clash of Russian (*Pan-Slavism*) and German (*Mitteleuropa*) geopolitical conceptions in Central Europe amid the violation of the principle of the Vienna system caused the First World War.

Rezumat.

Europa Centrală și de Est constituie o regiune istorică specifică care a cunoscut dominația dinastiilor conservatoare, precum Romanov (ramura Schleswig-Holstein-Gottorp), Hohenzollern, Casa de Habsburg (Habsburg-Lorraine) și sistemele conservatoare ale relațiilor internaționale, cum au fost, de exemplu, Sfânta Alianță (Heilige Allianz), Liga celor Trei Împărați (Drei-Kaiser-Abkommen) etc. Începând cu Congresul de la Viena și până la

izbucnirea Primului Război Mondial, conservatorismul monarhic al Imperiului Rus și al Imperiului Austriac s-a opus rezistență la iredentismului națiunilor vecine și la naționalismului din interiorul imperiilor. Vechiul regim a reușit să se mențină datorită solidarității dinastiilor. Cu toate acestea, rivalitățile imperiale din Europa Centrală și de Est de la sfârșitul secolului al XIX-lea — începutul secolului al XX-lea, însoțite de iredentismul națiunilor divizate (uneori fiind chiar stimulat de rivali), au erodat solidaritatea monarhiilor. Înainte de Primul Război Mondial, echilibrul de putere în regiune era marcat de instabilitate, Austria-Ungaria jucând în cadrul lui rolul de bastion sui generis împotriva expansiunii Rusiei în Balcani. Astfel, ciocnirea concepțiilor geopolitice rusești (*Panslavismul*) și germane (*Mitteuropa*) în Europa Centrală, pe fundalul încălcării principiului sistemului de la Viena, a provocat Primul Război Mondial.

Keywords.

Geopolitics, Central and Eastern Europe, the League of the Three Emperors, the Triple Alliance, Pan-Slavism, Mitteleuropa.

“*Mitteleuropa ist Kriegsfrucht.*”
Friedrich Naumann (1915)

Central and Eastern Europe is a special historical region, or, in other words, land in between, i.e., between Western Europe and Russia.¹ Geographically, the term ‘*Central and Eastern Europe*’ is quite vague, depending on the researcher’s view, and even called differently, for instance, ‘*In-Between Europe*’ (in German: *Zwischeneuropa*, or in Hungarian: *Köztes-Európa*).² Its geopolitical significance was formulated by Sir Halford Mackinder as follows: ‘*Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland* [the Core of Eurasia]: *Who rules the Heartland*

¹ Piotr Wandycz, *The Price of Freedom. A History of East Central Europe from Middle Ages to the Present* (London: Routledge, 1992), 1–2.

² Iván Miklós Szegő, “Köztes-Európa vagy Kelet-Közép-Európa: törekény országglánc lett a békeszerződések eredménye,” in *Az első világháború. Hadszíntér és háttér:* <http://elsovh.hu/koztes-europa-vagy-kelet-kozep-europa-torekeny-orzaglanc-lett-a-bekeszerzodesek-eredmenye/>; Lajos Pándi, *Köztes-Európa államalkotó nemzetei, 1763-1993* (Szeged, 1995); István Németh, *Hatalmi politika Közép-Európában. Német és osztrák-magyar Közép Európa tervezés 1871-1918* (Budapest: L’Harmattan, 2009); István Bibó, *Válogatott tanulmányok*, köt. II (Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1986), 185–265; David Kirby, *The Baltic World, 1772-1993: Europe’s Northern Periphery in an Age of Change* (London & New York: Longman, 1995), 1–9.

*commands the World-Island [Eurasia and Africa together]: Who rules World-Island commands the World.*⁵

Historically, this region had experienced the domination of the conservative dynasties such as the Romanovs (the Schleswig-Holstein-Gottorp's branch), the Hohenzollerns, and the House of Habsburg (Habsburg-Lorraine), and the conservative systems of international relations, for instance, the Holy Alliance (*Heilige Allianz*), the League of the Three Emperors (*Dreikaiserbund* & *Drei-Kaiser-Abkommen*), etc. Starting with the Congress of Vienna until the outbreak of the First World War, the monarchical conservatism of the Russian and the Austrian Empires had resisted irredentism of the neighbouring or divided between empires nations and nationalism inside the empires. The national revolutions, for instance, the Hungarian Revolution (1848-1849) and the Polish Uprising (1863-1864), were successfully suppressed through interventions by the neighbouring monarchies under the Vienna system of international relations adopted and opposed the revolution. The old regime of the dynastic empires in Central and Eastern Europe was based on and able to retain itself due to the solidarity of the dynasties. However, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the imperial rivalries, especially between Russia and Austria-Hungary, accompanied by irredentism of the divided nations (for instance, Poles, Serbs, Ukrainians, Romanians, etc.), which was sometimes even stimulated by the rivals), had eroded the principles of the Vienna system that caused the First World War. In contrast to France, where Charles Maurras' ideology managed to unite monarchism, anti-communism, and nationalism, the multinational empires (Austria-Hungary and Russia) demonstrated a strong confrontation between monarchism and nationalism. So, nationalism and geopolitical rivalries prevailed over monarchism. As a result, the grand dynasties such as the Romanovs, the Hohenzollerns, and the House of Habsburg fell.

Indeed, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Central and Eastern Europe become the major battlefield of European and World politics, more precisely, for instance, the Austro-Prussian War and the Third Italian War of Independence of 1866, the Russo-Turkish War and the Romanian War of Independence of 1877-1878, the Berlin Congress of 1878, the independence of Bulgaria of 1908, the Bosnian Crisis of 1908-1909, the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913.

In the middle and second half of the 19th century, the processes of national unification took place in Central Europe, resulting in the creation of new nation states: Romania in 1859, Italy in 1861, and Germany in 1871. The Austrian Empire was transformed into Austro-Hungary in 1867, and the Ottoman Empire was rapidly losing its European possessions following the proclamation of the

⁵ Sir Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality. A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1919), 186.

independence of Romania and Serbia in 1878 and Bulgaria in 1908, the Austro-Hungarian annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1908, and, finally, the First Balkan War of 1912-1913. The main actors of the international relations in the region (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Russia) did not have an access to the open sea and therefore they were forced to concentrate their aspirations on the Balkans.

In order to stabilize international relations in Central Europe, German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck initiated the establishment of the League of the Three Emperors (*Dreikaiserbund* or *Drei-Kaiser-Abkommen*) in 1873, which included Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Russia. The League aimed to preserve the inviolability of existing borders in Central Europe and to neutralize British and French influence in the Balkans. As a compromise, in Otto von Bismarck's view, the Balkans might be divided into the sphere of influence of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Western part) and the Russian Empire (Eastern part). Thus, Germany tried to play the role of arbiter and become the regional centre of power. However, at the end of the 19th century, the balance of power in the Balkans was shifted in favour of Germany and Austria-Hungary, and Russia almost lost its influence in Bulgaria, Serbia, and Romania.⁴ Germany and Austria-Hungary established their dynasties in Romania and Bulgaria. For instance, in 1866, the German Prince Karl von Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen became the Prince of Romania and then he was crowned as the King of Romania Carol I in 1881. Alexander of Battenberg became the Prince of Bulgaria in 1879. He abdicated in 1886 as a result of the pro-Russian officers' coup, but despite this fact, the next Prince Ferdinand von Saxe-Coburg und Gotha-Koháry, the former officer of the Austro-Hungarian army, was crowned as the Tsar of Bulgaria in 1908 and pursued a pro-German foreign policy course. As for Russia, the most important was the question of the Turkish straits. So, due to the League of the Three Emperors and the so-called Russian-German *Reinsurance Treaty* of 1887, Russia was given freedom of action against the Ottoman Empire.

Despite the conservative and dynastic character of the League, Russian and German foreign policies were determined by opposite ideological and geopolitical constructs towards Austria-Hungary. Russian Pan-Slavism was aimed against the territorial integrity of Austria-Hungary, otherwise, the German concept of *Mittleuropa* was in favour of the preservation of the Dual Monarchy. Consequently, the contradictions between Russia, on the one hand, and Germany

⁴ William Medlicott, "Bismarck and the Three Emperors' Alliance, 1881-87." *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 27 (1945): 67.

and Austria-Hungary, on the other hand, gradually led the League to collapse.⁵ Moreover, it was Russia's territorial claims against Austria-Hungary that forced the conclusion of a defensive alliance between Germany and Austria-Hungary, the so-called Dual Alliance (*Zweibund*) in 1879, which was transformed into the Triple Alliance (*Dreibund*) with the accession of Italy in 1882. Indeed, it marked the beginning of the realisation of the German Mitteleuropa project. The next step was the enlargement of the Alliance. For instance, despite the contradictions with Austria-Hungary, but, having been feared by Pan-Slavism and the potential threat from Russia, Romania joined the Triple Alliance in 1883.⁶ Here it should be also noted that even in 1878, Romania was concerned by transferring South Bessarabia to Russia, incorporated after the Crimean War.⁷ Furthermore, the Russian Pan-Slavist doctrine intended the annexation of Dobrudja (Dobrogea), as a way toward the Turkish Straits.⁸ At the same time, General Alexei Kuropatkin warned that Russia would not have any benefit from the annexation of Constantinople and the Dardanelles, but such annexation would have inevitably weakened Russia and posed a risk of a long armed struggle to secure this dangerous acquisition.⁹

In Russian foreign policy, two mainstreams had always fought: the *Germanophiles* (the advocates of the status quo in Central Europe) and the *Slavophiles* (the supporters of the disintegration of Austria-Hungary). According to Eugene Tarle, “the first based on a self-preservation instinct, the second not following the dictates of that instinct, and therefore much more active. For brevity, we agree to call the first movement Conservative, the second one Nationalist or Imperialist.”¹⁰

The Conservatives sought to preserve the monarchy, but it would be only possible if the war against Germany and Austria-Hungary had been avoided, because the possible war between Russia, on the one hand, and Germany and Austria-Hungary, on the other hand, would lead to the revolution and

⁵ Sergei Goriainov, “The End of the Alliance of the Emperors,” in *The American Historical Review*, vol. 23, no 2 (1918): 324-349; Robert Gildea, *Barricades and Borders: Europe 1800-1914* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 240.

⁶ Alexandru Ghişa, *Romania and Hungary at the Beginning of 20th Century. Establishing Diplomatic Relations (1918-1921)* (Cluj-Napoca: Centre for Transylvanian Studies, 2003), 7-8.

⁷ Alexei Kuropatkin, *Zadachi Russkoj Armii*, vol. 2 (Saint-Petersburg: Tipografie Trenke & Fjusio, 1910), 521.

⁸ Nikolai Danilevsky, *Rossija i Evropa. Vzgljad na kulturnye i politicheskie otnoshenia slanjanskogo mira k germano-romanskomu* (Moscow: Terra — Knizhnyi klub, 2008), 474-476; Ivan Dusinsky, *Geopolitika Rossii* (Москва: Москва, 2003), 74.

⁹ Kuropatkin, *Zadachi Russkoj Armii*, vol. 2, 525.

¹⁰ Eugene Tarle, “Germanskaja orientacija i P.N. Durnovo in 1914 godu,” in Eugene Tarle, *Sochinenija*, vol. XI (Moscow: Izdatelstvo AN SSSR, 1961), 503.

disintegration of the Russian Empire.¹¹ For instance, Pyotr Durnovo believed that: “*A struggle between Russia and Germany is profoundly undesirable to both sides, as it amounts to a weakening of the monarchist principle... Russia and Germany are the representatives of the conservative principle in the civilized world, as opposed to the democratic principle, incarnated in England and, to an infinitely lesser degree, in France...*”

But in the event of defeat, the possibility of which in a struggle with a foe like Germany cannot be overlooked, social revolution in its most extreme form is inevitable.”¹²

General Alexei Kuropatkin also took an Anti-Imperialist position. He argued that Russia reached its natural borders on the West and did not need the new territorial acquisitions, but the Pan-Slavists plunged Russia into war against Austria-Hungary. However, by taking a step toward the Balkan Peninsula Russia would take a step toward the European war.¹³ Constantin Leontiev concluded that Pan-Slavism became a very dangerous and fatal affair for the Russian Empire and the main task for Russian foreign policy should be to preserve Austria-Hungary as long as possible.¹⁴

Nationalists, on the contrary, were eager to complete the gathering of “*all Russians land*” which meant that a fight with Austria-Hungary for Galicia was inevitable. And the Imperialists as the Slavophiles believed that Austria-Hungary might be disintegrated in order to establish the newly Slav states on its territory.

The combination of Russian Imperialism and Pan-Slavism as the main conception of Russian foreign policy towards Central Europe was formulated by Nikolai Danilevsky in his book “*Russia and Europe*” first published in 1871. Danilevsky’s thought appeared amid the international background of the Russo-Prussian Alvensleben Convention of 1863, the defeats of the Austrian Empire in the wars against Italy and Prussia in 1866, and the famous historic phrase of the Russian Chancellor Prince Alexander Gorchakov: “*La Russie ne boude pas; elle se recueille*” (“*Russia is not sulking, she is composing herself*”). These events allowed him come to the conclusion that Austria-Hungary was a “fail” and “accidental” multinational state that should be disintegrated and portioned among Russia, Germany, Italy, Romania, and Serbia.¹⁵

Otherwise, Austria-Hungary could have survived only by means of the annexation of Bosnia and Hercegovina and Romania.¹⁶ It was a foreseeing observation and conclusion, as subsequent events demonstrated the correctness

¹¹ “Zapiska Durnovo,” in *Krasnaya Nov*, no 6 (1922): 178–199; Kuropatkin, *Zadachi Russkoj Armii*, vol. 3, 194.

¹² “Zapiska Durnovo,” in *Krasnaya Nov*, no 6 (1922): 195, 197.

¹³ Kuropatkin, *Zadachi Russkoj Armii*, vol. 3, 89, 194.

¹⁴ Constantin Leontiev, *Natsionalnaya politika kak orudie Wsemirnoj revolyutsii* (Moscow: Tovarishchestvo I. Kushnerev & K^o, 1889), 44, 45.

¹⁵ Danilevsky, *Rossija i Evropa*, 424, 433-434.

¹⁶ Danilevsky, *Rossija i Evropa*, 437.

of this approach. Indeed, Nikolai Danilevsky was able to foresee further steps for the self-preservation of Austria-Hungary at the beginning of the 20th century. In particular, the first step of this programme was the incorporation of Bosnia and Herzegovina undertaken by Baron Alois von Aehrenthal in 1908, and the second step followed during the First World War was the partition of Serbia (the northern part to Austria-Hungary and Macedonia to Bulgaria), and then the project of Count Ottokar Czernin to incorporate the Kingdom of Romania into the Habsburg Empire with the subsequent transfer of Transylvania to Romania.¹⁷ General Alexei Kuropatkin also proposed that the best solution for Austria-Hungary would be the annexation of Serbia in 1878.¹⁸ As for Austria-Hungary, the occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1878 and its annexation followed in 1908 were the necessary measures to prevent the establishment of the powerful South Slav State in the Balkan Peninsula.¹⁹

According to Nikolai Danilevsky, the dissolution of Austria-Hungary was supposed to be in two phases. The first phase aimed to satisfy the irredentism of neighbours in order to accomplish their national unification. Those lands where some national group prevailed should be incorporated into the existing nation-states, for instance, Germans to Germany, Italians to Italy, Russians to Russia, Serbs to Serbia, and Romanians to Romania.²⁰ Hungary, in his view, was also an accidental state and might be dismembered by the separation of Slavs and Romanians.²¹ In the second phase, after the dissolution of Austria-Hungary, the newly nation-states that emerged in its territory should establish the pro-Russian alliance including the following:²²

- the Kingdom of Poland, including Russian, Austrian, and German parts of Polish land;

¹⁷ Count Ottokar Czernin *In the World War* (London, New York, Toronto, Melbourne: Cassell & Co, Ltd., 1919), 48-51, 80; József Galántai, *Austria-Hungary and the War: the October 1913 Crisis — Prelude to July 1914* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1980), 6–8; Alexander Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 263, 268; Ignác Romsics, *The Dismantling of Historic Hungary: The Peace Treaty of Trianon, 1920* (Boulder & New York: Social Science Monographs, 2002), 23-25; Henry Meyer, *Mitteleuropa in German Thought and Action, 1815-1945* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1955), 1, 135, 139; Samuel Williamson, “War Aims and War Aims Discussions (Austria-Hungary),” in Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, Bill Nasson (eds.), *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, issued by Freie Universität Berlin (Berlin 2014-10-08): https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/war_aims_and_war_aims_discussions_austria-hungary

¹⁸ Kuropatkin, *Zadachi Russkoj Armii*, vol. 2, 522.

¹⁹ Kuropatkin, *Zadachi Russkoj Armii*, vol. 2, 450, 515.

²⁰ Danilevsky, *Rossija i Evropa*, 433-434.

²¹ Danilevsky, *Rossija i Evropa*, 427, 431.

²² Danilevsky, *Rossija i Evropa*, 474-476.

- the Kingdom of Czechs, Moravians, and Slovaks, including the Northern-Western part of Hungary mostly with Slav population;

- the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, including Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Hercegovina, North Albania, Banat, Croatia, Slavonia, Dalmatia, Istria, Trieste, Krajina, parts of Carinthia and Styria, but excluding Macedonia in favour of the Kingdom of Bulgaria;

- the Kingdom of Romania, including parts of Transylvania, Bukovina, and Bessarabia, excluding South Bessarabia and Dobruja in favour of Russia;

-the Magyar Kingdom or the Kingdom of Hungary and Transylvania.

On the eve of the First World War, the Pan-Slavist and Imperialist ideas became dominant in Russian foreign policy, especially under the leadership of Sergei Sazonov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who believed the dissolution of Austria-Hungary as the main task of Russia's foreign policy in Central Europe and the establishment of such the kingdoms as Polish, Czech-Slovakian, Hungarian, and Serbo-Croatian as new allies of Russia.²³

At the beginning of the Great War, Sergei Sazonov made some attempts to involve Romania in the war against Austria-Hungary through the conclusion of the so-called Sazonov-Diamandi Agreement of 1 October 1914, according to which Transylvania, Banat, and Bukovina had to be transferred to Romania and the proposed new western border of Romania would have to run along the Tisza River.²⁴

In 1916, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs created a map of the future newly independent states that had to emerge in the territory of Austria-Hungary. Besides that this map also demonstrated the Russian territorial aspirations: Galicia, Transcarpatia, including Košice (Kassa), and even Tokaj. Moreover, it was proposed to create the so-called Slavic corridor connecting Czechoslovakia and Serbia-Croatia and separating Hungary from Austria.²⁵

²³ Sergei Sazonov, *Vospominanija* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnoshenija, 1991), 338-339.

²⁴ The Sazonov-Diamandy Agreement, the secret Russo-Romanian convention of 1914. *Europe Centenary*: <https://europecentenary.eu/the-sazonov-diamandy-agreement-the-secret-russo-romanian-convention-of-1914/>

Ion Gumenii, "Romania As Reflected in the Acts of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Empire: From the Outbreak of World War I Until the Conclusion of the Sazonov-Diamandy Agreement," in *Transylvanian Review*, no 4 (2017): 18-29; Vladlen Vinogradov, "Romania in the First World War: The Years of Neutrality, 1914-1916," in *The International History Review*, vol. 14, no. 3 (August 1992): 455-456.

²⁵ Archiv Vneshnej Politiki Rossijskoj Imperii [The Archive of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire Архив внешней политики Российской Империи] (AVPRI), f. Osobyj politicheskij otdel [the Special Political Department], op. 474, d. 439, l. 47 (map).

Map 1. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' project of the dismemberment of Austria-Hungary (1916).



Source: Archiv Vneshnej Politiki Rossijskoj Imperii [The Archive of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire Архив внешней политики Российской Империи] (AVPRI), f. Osoby politicheskij otdel [the Special Political Department], op. 474, d. 439, l. 47 (map).

In January 1915, Sergei Sazonov was so enthusiastic about the disintegration of Austria-Hungary that he even rejected the possibility of a separate peace with it on terms of ceding Galicia to Russia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to Serbia. He stated: “*Austria-Hungary must be dismembered!*”²⁶

Russian Imperialism originated from the concept that the Russian Empire was a successor of the Grand Duchy of Moscow and a “*collector of Russian lands*” that produced the struggle against the Grand Duchedom of Lithuania and Rus, then Rzeczpospolita, then the Partitions of Poland (1772, 1793, 1795, 1815). So, Galicia was the only land of Ancient Rus that remained outside the sovereignty of the Russian Emperor. Consequently, the incorporation of Galicia would be the completion of the process of the “*gathering of the Russian lands.*”²⁷ At

²⁶ Maurice Paléologue, *Dnevnik Posla* (Moscow: Izdatelstvo I. V. Zakharov, 2003): <http://istmat.info/node/25187>

²⁷ Pavel Milyukov, “Territorialnye priobreteniya Rossii,” in *Chego zhdet Rossija ot vojny* (Petrograd: Prometey, 1915), 49-50.

the same time, the title of the Austrian Emperor also included *the King of Galicia and Lodomeria* which meant that a clash of empires was imminent.

Suffering from irredentism, Austria-Hungary prepared to repel attacks from three sides: Serbia, Russia, and Italy. At the same time, before the First World War, the foreign ministers of the Dual Monarchy Baron Alois Lexa von Aehrenthal and Count Leopold Berchtold hoped for the rapprochement with Russia and the revival of the League of the Three Emperors.²⁸ They believed that the main challenge for the Austro-Hungarian security and integrity was Serbia.²⁹ As the first step to resolve this issue Baron Alois Aehrenthal made the decision to annex Bosnia and Herzegovina³⁰ then the next step should be the partition of Serbia between Austria-Hungary and Bulgaria.³¹ According to Archduke Franz Ferdinand's project, Austria-Hungary had a chance to be transformed into the federation of the kingdoms (including Serbia and Romania) under the Habsburg dynasty.³²

As for Austria-Hungary, the First World War was a struggle for survival against the irredentism of neighbouring states. However, irredentism (especially, Polish and Ukrainian) was also a challenge for the Russian Empire, therefore on 20 November 1914, the Austrian government, in its note addressed to the allies, announced that the aim of Austria-Hungary in this war was to separate the Ukrainian people from Russia and establish an independent the Kingdom of Ukraine. Austria-Hungary pursued an aim to reduce Russian capability to influence the Balkan and the Black Sea.³³ During the war, suffering from heavy losses and defeats Austria-Hungary was forced to abandon its expansionist plans and even make some concessions to Russia in Galicia.³⁴ As Count Ottokar Czernin remarked in February 1917, the conclusion of peace became possible because Russia had already lost interest in the Slav issue.³⁵

During the war, the Russian Empire suffered some territorial losses, for instance, Poland, Lithuania, and Courland. After the abdication of Nicholas II,

²⁸ Galántai, *Austria-Hungary and the War*, 9-11; Czernin, *In the World War*, 51.

²⁹ Galántai, *Austria-Hungary and the War*, 6-7.

³⁰ Galántai, *Austria-Hungary and the War*, 6-8.

³¹ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 263; Meyer, *Mitteleuropa in German Thought and Action*, 135; Romsics, *The Dismantling of Historic Hungary*, 23-25.

³² Czernin, *In the World War*, 48-50.

³³ Andrij Lozinsky, "Ukraina v geopolitychnykh planah Nimetchyny ta Avstro-Ugorshchyny naperedodni Pershoi Svitovoi vijny" in *Ukraina-Evropa-Svit*, Seria: *Istoria, Mizhnarodni vidnosyny*, no 18 (2016): 158; Igor Chornovol, "Galitska shlyhta i proekt "Kyivskogo Korolivstva" Otto Bismarka," in *Suchasnist*?, no 3 (1997): 65; AVPRI, f. Osobyj Politicheskij Otdel, op. 474, d. 36, l. 42-43.

³⁴ AVPRI, f. Vojna [the War], op. 473, d. 193, l. 13, 21, 36-37; f. Osobyj Politicheskij Otdel, op. 474, d. 21, l. 34.

³⁵ AVPRI, f. Vojna, op. 473, d. 193, l. 21; f. Osobyj Politicheskij Otdel, op. 474, d. 26, l. 8.

the Empire began to lose its territories in Europe gradually. The first Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Provisional Government Pavel Milyukov was forced to admit that Russia lost Finland and Ukraine.³⁶ Furthermore, the so-called *Milyukov Note* to the Allies affirming to them that the Provisional Government would continue the war with the same war aims that the former Russian Imperial one provoked an unprecedented manifestation and impatience of Russian public opinion and the first ministerial crisis of the Provisional Government and finally led to Milyukov's resignation.³⁷ It happened because the Petrograd Soviet (Council) insisted on peace without "annexations or indemnities." On 7(20) April 1917, "Izvestia" published the Manifesto of the Bern International Socialist Commission stated that the war provoked the Russian Revolution which became the "European Revolution," but the "Revolution threatened by fratricidal war without the end". Furthermore, the Russian Revolution might be suppressed by the reaction forces of the old regime. Consequently, in order to prevent the such possibility for reaction, the Russian Revolution must be supported by the International Socialist Revolution, primarily in Germany and Austria-Hungary.³⁸

If the first Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Provisional Government Pavel Milyukov formulated the Russian aims in Central Europe as the liberation of the Slavic peoples of Austria-Hungary, the restoration of the rights of Serbia, and the incorporation of Eastern Galicia into Russia,³⁹ then, the next Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Provisional Government Mikhail Tereshchenko stated in his report to the Provisional Council of the Russian Republic (the so-called Pre-Parliament) that the main task of the state policy was not to acquire new territories after the victory in the war but to retain the remaining limits: to maintain at least Estonia.⁴⁰ Thus, the Russian Empire which planned new territorial acquisitions and the dismemberment of Austria-Hungary was forced to withdraw from Eastern Europe to the borders of the period of Peter the Great which was Germany's war aim.⁴¹

³⁶ Pavel Milyukov, *Vospominaniya*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Sovremennik 1990), 336.

³⁷ Robert Warth, *Antanta i Russkaja revolyutsiya, 1917-1918* (Moscow: Centrpoligraf, 2006), 57-75; Oleg Airapetov, *Uchastie Rossijskoj Imperii v Pervoj Mirovoj vojne (1914-1917)*, vol. IV: *1917 god. Raspad* (Moscow: Kuchkovo Pole, 2016), 202-203.

³⁸ Nikolai Avdeev, *Revolutsya 1917 goda. Hronika Sobytyi*, vol. II: *April-Maj* (Moscow & Petrograd: Gosizdat, 1923), 19.

³⁹ Vyacheslav Vasyukov, *Vneshnjaja politika Vremennogo Pravitelstva* (Moscow: Mysl, 1966), 87-88; Andrei Chertishchev, *Politicheskie partii i massovoe politicheskoe soznanie dejstvujuschchej Russoj Armii v gody Pervoj Mirovoj vojny (Ijul 1914 - Mart 1918 gg.)* (Moscow: Zhukovskiy Air Force Engineering Academy, 2006), 22, 74, 262.

⁴⁰ Alexei Ignatiev, "Ot "lichnoj diplomatii" k "politike interesov"," in T. Filippova, et. al. *Rossija: gosudarstvennye prioritety i natsionalnye interesy* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2000), 202.

⁴¹ Sazonov, *Vospominaniya*, 273; Robert Bideleux, Ian Jeffries, *A History of Eastern Europe. Crisis and Change* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 12; Meyer, *Mittleuropa in German Thought and Action*, 132;

Map 2. The Russian and German Geopolitical Clash



Source: *Tsarskaja Rossija -- tjurma narodov. Zakhvatnicheskie ustremenija tsarskogo imperializma.* Izogiz, 1936.

On 9 September 1914, the German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg signed the so-called “Provisional Notes on the Direction of Our Policy on the Conclusion of Peace,” in which he remarked that “Russia must be thrust as far as possible from Germany’s eastern frontier and her domination over the non-Russian vassal peoples broken.”⁴²

Before the outbreak of the war and even during the war, two points of view regarding Russia competed in German political circles. The first, represented by the so-called Pan-German League and Paul von Rohrbach, defended the idea of the dismemberment of Russia as a way of Germany's domination in Central and Eastern Europe. The second, headed by Professor Otto Gersch, developed Bismarck's political course to support good-neighbourly relations with Russia and proceeded from the premise that Russia should remain

Anatoly Utkin, *Pervaja Mirovaja Vojna* (Moscow: Algoritm, 2001), 462; Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: W. Norton, 1967), 496.

⁴² Gerald Feldman (ed.), *German Imperialism, 1914-1918: the Development of a Historical Debate* (London, Sydney, & Toronto, 1972), 125-126; Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 258.

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an indivisible state in close alliance with Germany. Such an alliance was supposed to provide Germany with the necessary resources for her confrontation with the Anglo-Saxon world.

The German military command was inclined to follow Otto Gersch's views but the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was mainly guided by Paul von Rohrbach's recommendations to create buffer states: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Courland, in order to protect Europe from the "Russian Menace."⁴³ In September 1914, Heinrich Class, the president of the Pan-German League, also proposed to establish the newly independent states of East Europe: Ukraine, Poland, including Galicia, and several Baltic states.⁴⁴

Map 3. Germany's Aims and Their Realisation During the Brest-Litovsk System of International Relations



Source: *German East after Treaty of Brest Litovsk (3rd March 1918)* in <https://www.mapmania.org/map/78035/german-east-after-treaty-of-brest-litovsk-3rd-march-1918>

⁴³ Henry Meyer, "Rohrbach and His Osteuropa," in *The Russian Review*, vol. 2, no 1 (1942): 63-64.

⁴⁴ Meyer, *Mitteleuropa in German Thought and Action*, 132.

Regardless of the main vectors of geopolitics, control over the Black Sea region was a prerequisite for dominance in the region of Central and Eastern Europe as a whole. Germany and Austria-Hungary, in their strategic plans, intended to oust Russia from Eastern Europe, eliminate its influence in the Balkans and the Caucasus and return it to the borders of the Moscow principality. In January 1917, Paul von Rohrbach wrote that Russia should be divided into the following parts: Finland, Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, and Muscovy.⁴⁵ According to him, it “will ensure a stable state and balance in Eastern Europe.”⁴⁶

The course on the disintegration of Russia in German politics prevailed during and after the Brest-Litovsk negotiations. The German leadership, including the Kaiser, was inclined to preserve the status quo of the dismemberment of Russia into independent regions (under the condition of the irrevocability of Russian territorial losses such as Finland, Poland, Lithuania, the Baltic provinces, and the Caucasus):⁴⁷

- Muscovy;
- Ukraine;
- The South-Eastern Union of the Cossack Hosts, Mountaineers of the Caucasus, and Free Peoples of the Steppes;
- Siberia.

Thus, the German geopolitical plans for the reconstruction of Central and Eastern Europe were to form the newly independent states such as Lithuania and Ukraine as the counter-balance to Poland in order to limit the Polish expansion to the East. In any case, Germany aimed to separate Russia from Europe through the so-called chain of buffer states such as Finland, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine, and to return Russia to the pre-Petrine borders of the Grand Duchy of Moscow. This plan was realised in 1918, during the Brest-Litovsk system of international relations when the former Russian Empire was completely disintegrated. Firstly, Russia was detached from Central Europe by buffer states: the Kingdom of Finland, the Baltic Grand Duchy, the Kingdom of Lithuania, the Kingdom of Poland, and the Ukrainian State. Secondly, Transcaucasian nations, Siberia, Ural, the Cossacks Hosts, and the Caucasian nations declared independence. The Almighty Don Host, the Kuban People's Republic, the Terek Cossack Host, and the Astrakhan Cossack Host established the South-Eastern Union of Cossack Hosts, Caucasian Highlanders, and Free Peoples of the Steppe, that separated Soviet Russia from the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea.

⁴⁵ Rossijskiy Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsialno-politicheskoy istorii [the Russian State Archive of Social-Political History] (RGASPI), f. 71, op. 35, d. 473, l. 17-18.

⁴⁶ AVPRI, f. Osobyj Politicheskij Otdel, op. 474, d. 36, l. 40.

⁴⁷ Utkin, *Pervaja Mirovaja Vojna*, 468.

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If before the war France and Great Britain considered Austro-Hungary as an important *sui generis* bulwark against Russian expansion towards the Balkans, but during the war, the Allies changed their minds in favour of the independence of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs oriented to France and Great Britain in order to prevent both German and Russian dominance in Central Europe.⁴⁸ Besides that Sir Halford Mackinder insisted to create between Russia and Germany the so-called “*Middle Tier*” of the newly independent states, such as Poland, the Baltic States, and Finland in order to prevent the new war between Russia and Germany and reduce simultaneously the Russian and German dominance in Central and Eastern Europe.⁴⁹

Map. 4. Mackinder’s “Middle Tier”



Source: Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality. A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1919), 198.

Thus, if Germany and Austria-Hungary did not aim to disintegrate Russia but only separate some of its territories in order to reduce the Russian

⁴⁸ Romsics, *The Dismantling of Historic Hungary*, 30-31; Karl Stadler “The Disintegration of the Austrian Empire,” *The Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 3, no 4 (1968): 178; Bideleux & Jeffries, *A History of Eastern Europe. Crisis and Change*, 322-323.

⁴⁹ Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, 196-198.

influence in Central and Eastern Europe, the Entente powers (Russia, Great Britain, France), on the contrary, pursued such a goal towards Austria-Hungary. However, as a result of World War I and the revolution, both Empires (Russia and Austria-Hungary) collapsed.

Austria-Hungary and Russia were the classic dynastic states. That is why both empires disintegrated as a result of social revolution and national self-determination. The difference between Russia and Austria-Hungary was that Russia, having lost a large part of its territories, had the chance to become a nation-state, while Austria-Hungary could only await the collapse and formation of several nation-states on its territory, such as Hungary, Czechoslovakia, etc., and the remaining parts of the empire could be integrated into neighbouring nation-states: Germany, Italy, Poland, Romania, Serbia, etc. Most nations of Central and Eastern Europe associated their independence with the defeat of Russia, for instance, Ukrainians, Poles, Finns, etc. And, it should be added that entering the war, Romania was the only state that could complete its national unification under the condition of the defeat of both Russia and Austria-Hungary.

Thus, as a result of the First World War and the dissolution of the Russian Empire and Austria-Hungary, Great Britain and Romania managed to realise their geopolitical aims.

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