

## **THE SOUTH SLAV QUESTION:**

### **DEALING WITH MULTI-ETHNICITY**

#### **An Interview with Marc Stefan Peters**

*Marc Stefan Peters studied History, Slavonic Studies and Central European Studies in Vienna and Budapest. His dissertation dealt with Austria-Hungary's last commanding general and governor of Bosnia-Herzegovina. As a reserve officer he was cross-cultural operational adviser to the commander of the German KFOR troops in Kosovo several times.*

#### **HH: Was there any opposition to the occupation of Bosnia-Herzegovina within the Monarchy?**

MSP: A systematic answer to this question requires a look at the sociopolitical constellation that had arisen as a result of the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867: While influential circles of "Cisleithania" endeavored to ensure the supremacy of German Austrians in the western half of the Monarchy, the elites of "Transleithania" tried to strengthen the Magyar influence in the East. These positions excluded the idea of an integration of the primarily Slavic populated provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina into the association of any of the two states of the Monarchy. This aversion of politically influential circles against a commitment of the Monarchy in Bosnia and Herzegovina clashed with the aspirations of leading imperial military officers who wanted an incorporation of these countries for geostrategic reasons. The Hungarian Count Julius Andr ssy the Elder, who was initially against occupation or annexation, finally changed his mind and acquired the mandate for the occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by Austria-Hungary at the Berlin Congress of 1878, as the Monarchy's foreign minister. Moreover, the Monarchy was given the permission to build administrative structures in the occupied countries, and in this context it is significant that the occupied territory became a common administrative region of "Cisleithania" and "Transleithania". In other words, in terms of power-politics Bosnia-Herzegovina was part of the Monarchy, while it remained isolated from the inner political and social dynamics of both halves of the Empire; with this complex structure the criticism and major concerns of the occupation's opponents were taken into account. Quite a few opponents of the occupation of Bosnia-Herzegovina mainly feared the (expected) financial burden of this undertaking. Thus, the question can be answered clearly: Yes, there was an opposition to the occupation of Bosnia-Herzegovina by the Monarchy.

#### **HH: What approaches existed in solving the national question in Bosnia? What impact did Austro-Hungarian rule have here?**

MSP: If a national question (or even a complex of several national issues) "in" (!) Bosnia-Herzegovina is mentioned, then it should be clear that this issue was also a relevant one far beyond the borders of the country. The national movements of the 19th century were by their very nature collective movements and so the integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina into a Greater-Croatian, Greater-Serbian or even South Slavic unit had been discussed from different perspectives; therefore, we can speak of different "concepts of integration" that

competed with each other at least partially. From the perspective of the political leadership of the Monarchy it was almost more important that the number of the already mentioned "concepts of integration" would face the same number of theoretical approaches to implement certain ideas corresponding to the Monarchy's political and constitutional structure. And here the largest discrepancy between the Greater-Croatian and the Greater-Serbian concept came to light: while the Greater-Croatian idea should be realized in the context of a trialistic transformation of the Habsburg Empire, the Greater Serbian idea was irredentist and in the view of Vienna or Budapest subversive per se. During the First World War the so-called "South Slav question" was then discussed more intensively than before. In that process, it became rather clear that it was above all the Hungarian political elite, who wanted to keep the status quo, which practically excluded a change or even a modification of the existing dualistic structure. Initially Hungary, the "winner of 1867", did not want to give up its privileged position as the only partner of "Cisleithania", which would have happened by creating a third state of the Monarchy or even by a general federalization of the Monarchy. Hungary intended to preserve the territorial status quo of both (!) parts of the Empire to maintain the balance of power between the two parts of the Empire. This intention wouldn't have excluded enlarging both states of the Monarchy evenly. But Hungary strived against this idea as well, since any significant expansion of its own territory would have changed the proportion of the Magyar population within the state and would have created a potential trouble spot, which might have evoked an unwanted discussion on the structure of the Monarchy.

**HH: Francis Ferdinand was always rumored to have been in favor of a trialistic structure of the Monarchy. What plans did he have concerning the Monarchy's future structure?**

MSP: First, we should go into the topic of "trialism". Yes, it is true that Francis Ferdinand's name was consistently associated to the concept of "trialism". The fact is that the Archduke as heir to the throne had strong aversions to the powerful position Hungary had as part of the dualistic Monarchy; the conservative Francis Ferdinand disapproved of relevant parts of the mostly liberal Hungarian elite taking advantage of their position gained through the compensation of 1867 using it as a vehicle to articulate (potentially) separatist attitudes and promoting one-sided Hungarian interests. Another fact is that the Archduke had at one time or another considered plans to transform the Monarchy after his accession to the throne by creating a South Slav part - this in particular with the aim of weakening the nationalist forces in Budapest. However, the flirtation of the Archduke with the concept of trialism remained a mind game. In particular, Francis Ferdinand saw danger that even the projected South Slav part could have been a hotbed of nationalism; in a letter to the German Emperor William II from 1909, he described trialism as a "disaster." It seems more realistic that the Archduke and his supportive circle of advisers in the Viennese Belvedere Palace formed a kind of informal "think-tank-office", where different plans for a future political reconstruction of the Monarchy were discussed. By all appearances, it seems that the Archduke's considerations for the revision of the Monarchy's political structure oscillated between two landmarks: The consideration of historically grown structures that suggested the idea of a federalization, as well as the requirement to weaken nationalist movements, which would have demanded an authoritarian leadership and centralization. It still might have been like this when he was shot by a nationalist fanatic on 28 June 1914.

**HH: What was the Ottoman heritage, which the Monarchy faced in 1878 when their rule in Bosnia-Herzegovina began?**

MSP: First of all, the so-called „millet-system“ was of great importance. This system was an important component of the social order of the Ottoman Empire, which had expanded in the late Middle Ages and the early Modern Period. It enabled the self-management of each denominational group in the Ottoman Empire. Although this system was formally abolished in the 19th century, it has shaped mentalities sustainably: the principle of personal autonomy strengthened the internal cohesion of each denominational group while it underlined the social separation of the denominational groups, so the system worked equally for the purpose of intra-denominational consolidation and inter-religious segregation. Regarding Bosnia-Herzegovina, this meant that the Muslims, Catholics and Orthodox people geographically were living together but socially they were mainly living isolated from one another, when Austria-Hungary invaded in 1878.

**HH: Did the Austro-Hungarian rule influence the "national awakening" in Bosnia-Herzegovina?**

MSP: We should bear in mind that warnings of the "national awakening" in Bosnia-Herzegovina came from outside. After the occupation of the country, the acting leaders in Zagreb and Belgrade tried to involve the Catholic and Orthodox people in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the Croatian or Serbian national movement. The Monarchy hardly had any influence on these dynamic processes. This changed when it became clear that the group of Bosnian-Herzegovinian Muslims could become a pawn between Croats and Serbs: The Austro-Hungarian Minister of Finance Benjamin Kállay, who was responsible for Bosnia, made a great political move when he supported the traditional privileges of the Muslims thus creating a loyal Muslim society. Moreover, this policy weakened the national ambitions of Zagreb and Belgrade, which was very important for the Monarchy.

**HH: What is the most important legacy of the Monarchy in Bosnia-Herzegovina in your opinion?**

MSP: In my opinion the raising of the standard of education. Apart from the obvious benefits that the educational policy of the Monarchy brought during the Austro-Hungarian rule for those directly affected, this policy also brought a sustainable orientation of the elite of this country towards (Western-) European values in spite of the collapse of 1918.

**HH: What can the EU learn from the policies of the Monarchy in Bosnia-Herzegovina?**

MSP: Bosnia-Herzegovina's geopolitical position in a transition zone between Central Europe and the Balkans, a politically rather unstable region, is an aspect that was as relevant in 1878 as it is today. Given the fact that Bosnia-Herzegovina experienced a period of political stability from the beginning of the Austro-Hungarian rule in 1878 and especially by leading the inhabitants to the (West-) European culture, the EU should draw the corresponding conclusions as soon as possible: The EU should put efforts in abolishing the extremely unfortunate Dayton-System and accepting Bosnia-Herzegovina as a member state.

## **HH: Was the Monarchy doomed in the age of nationalism?**

MSP: The question undoubtedly leads to slippery terrain - namely to the field of historical speculation. In many different ways it can be speculated about what would have happened to Austria-Hungary, if the First World War had not occurred or if Austria-Hungary had won that war or if the war had turned out differently. There are many points, which can serve as a starting point for such speculations, such as the fact that the opposing powers of the First World War decided relatively late to define the destruction of the Monarchy as a war aim. Realizing that any speculation is associated with large uncertainties makes the answer to this question quite simple in the end: Of course, the Monarchy was not doomed even in the age of nationalism. I am making this statement, considering the fact that there are no compelling laws that determine the course of history. It is true that mostly human behavior determines the course of history - but this is and will remain unpredictable. Finally, it should be mentioned that there were other multiethnic European States in the dark, nationalist 20<sup>th</sup> century that found their chances of survival and eventually came to benefit from qualitative growth, such as Belgium and Switzerland. Moreover, Belgium was included in the supranational integration of the Benelux area starting in 1944. And we remember: In former times that Benelux region had been under the significant influence of a dynasty, which later found its focus on the Danube region.