

With these two seemingly insignificant short stories – insignificant, that is, when weighed against the most well-known works and creations of the two authors – both Wells and Conan Doyle can be proven to have been astonishingly prescient in their depiction of the deadly plant themes that would be developed to such disturbing effect in mid-to-late 20th century fiction.

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NATIONALISM AND INTERNATIONALISM: H.G. WELLS AND HUNGARIAN REVISION

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In the 1920s, H.G. Wells took a stand on Hungary's position in Europe which has to be seen in its historical context. The most significant Hungarian political problem between the two World Wars was the question of the political revision of the Versailles-Trianon treaty of 1919, as a result of which Hungary lost two-thirds of its then territory. The main efforts of the "maimed" country were concentrated on regaining these areas. Although the most painful loss was that of Transylvania to Rumania, the cession of the Hungarian "Highlands" to Slovakia and of the agriculturally important southern area to Yugoslavia were also very significant. These events were due in part to Hungary's participation on the side of Germany in the First World War and also to the fact that the "First Hungarian Socialist Republic" had appeared to be supportive of the newly-created Soviet Russia. With little regard for ethnic borders or national minority issues which would arise in the future, the Western allies decided to teach a "lesson" to the daring Hungarians, who, as minor partners within the Austro-Hungarian monarchy had been tragically pushed into the conflict leading to the war. The Hapsburg Empire, a long-time ally of Germany, decided on which side Hungary would fight. Hungarian troops had already participated in various military conflicts on behalf of the Monarchy, and this happened again in 1914.

With little regard for Hungary's subordinate position within the monarchy, the victorious Western allies decided to curtail the territory of the once "Great" Hungary in favour of the surrounding countries. Revision of the treaty became a burning issue for the country, the only issue capable of uniting the population. This was the result of active propaganda by successive Hungarian governments together with the sense of injustice that so deeply and emotionally moved all strata of Hungarian society between the two World Wars. Naturally, the Hungarian authorities did their utmost to win support abroad for their aim of regaining the lost territories and to sway both formal and informal international opinion towards a revision in favour of the "maimed" country.

This was the situation in 1927, when the Hungarian daily *Az Est*¹ informed its readers of that the world-famous H.G. Wells planned to discuss the "Hungarian question" in the near future. At that time, Wells was giving more and more attention to his fight for the attainment of his world-unity. These underlay his theory of the World State, which he saw as a constantly growing political power which would be based on the understanding and intelligence of different social groups - from the best-educated to the most community-minded or socially-conscious - depending on Wells's frequently modified ideas.

By 1927, Wells was spending less time writing fiction and the success of *A Short History of the World* encouraged him to concentrate on politics. He must have been well-informed on the question of Hungarian revision since he had participated as a news correspondent in the Washington Conference of 1919 and had sharply opposed its ideas. He soon realised that since the Trianon peace treaty Hungary had become the flashpoint of the Balkan peninsula, and this perception put the Hungarian question into the sphere of world peace.² By this time he had anticipated a devastating, possibly nuclear war, and in order to prevent it he turned - with others - to the problem of Hungarian revision.

The long-awaited interview did not take place until 1930, when Countess Bethlen, wife of the then Hungarian Prime Minister, met Wells in England. Also present at this conversation was Ferenc Kiss, London correspondent of *Az Est*, who had sent a great deal of propaganda material dealing with the proposed revision to prominent British politicians. Wells's interview in 1930 revealed that in Great Britain, "almost on a daily basis is posted some leaflet about the problem of the currently fashionable question of the Hungarian revision"; the writer added that he generally put such leaflets aside until he could afford the time to read them.³

After Lord Rothermere had shown that he was obviously supportive of Hungary, Ferenc Kiss expected the socialist Wells to condemn the lukewarm British public attitude to the Hungarian cause. With this in mind, Kiss wrote a letter to Wells calling his attention "to the unbearable and dangerous situation created by the Trianon treaty". Wells's answer, sent shortly before his wife's death, stressed the importance of the Middle European problem created by the peace treaty, but postponed a detailed

¹ Ferenc Kiss. "Wells, 'feltétlenül' foglalkozni fog a magyar kérdéssel." *Az Est*. 23 (1927): 3

² Sándor Körmeny-Ekes. "Anglia." *Magyar Szemle*. 3/27/sz (1929): 273-75.

answer because of his wife's ill health. It was not until three years later, in December 1930, that the daily, *Pesti Napló*, reported on the meeting between Countess Bethlen and Wells, where he had outlined his opinion of the Hungarian revision.

Despite the high expectations in Hungary, the article in December 1930 afforded no positive answer or outspoken support. First, Wells was offended by the "high number of angry letters" he had received in response to the Hungarian publication of *The Outline of History*. These scornful letters had condemned him for his incorrect data on the origin of the Hungarians in particular, and for his allegedly abusive description of them in general. As a matter of fact, Wells really had no precise knowledge of Hungarian history. He identified the "Turkish-blooded", "Finnish and Turkish-speaking" Hungarians with the Avars. He believed that their invasions against the "civilized" European nations had taken place since the Charlemagne period and that these "looters" had had to be taught to appreciate "civilization" by force. He added that for the Hungarian turning to Christianity meant nothing more than adaptation to the western and Middle-European political conditions.

This negative opinion evoked outraged attacks from Hungarian right-wing political circles. On the pages of *Magyar Kultúra*, Margit Trugly referred to Wells as an English socialist bitterly opposed to the Hungarians, and described his *Outline* as a destructive collection of gossip unworthy of serious literary criticism; its author was described as a "literary quack" promoted only by the unscrupulous advertising industry.⁴

Wells was a person of encyclopaedic knowledge, who made a number of "excursions" into the fields of an appreciable number of different disciplines, but he was unable or perhaps unwilling to make a thorough study of any of them. What is more, everything he wrote or examined in this area was considered in relation to what he saw as the dichotomy between the "barbarian" energy of the nomad peoples - represented in this case by the Hungarian tribes - and the common life of settled folk, the former representing creative will and the latter imagination, both necessary for building unified, world-wide, human culture and peace.⁵ All these qualities were to

³ Ferenc Kiss. "H.G. Wells, a világ legnépszerűbb írója elmondja őszinte véleményét a magyar revíziós propagandáról." *Pesti Napló*. 293 (1930): 7-8.

⁴ James G. Gillis. "H.G. Wells/Notes by Trugly, Margit." *Magyar Kultúra*, 1927. 202-208.

⁵ Frank McConnell. *The Science Fiction of H.G. Wells*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981, p.198.

be created with the help of education supported by creative energy. Although his ideas were in many ways ahead of those of his contemporaries, he was not supportive of Hungarian revision.

Wells criticised Lloyd George, Clemenceau, and Wilson harshly, saying that they were too old either to create or achieve new ideas. Wells regarded himself as a revisionist, though his revisionism by no means meant "medication for the painful Hungarian wounds by Europe". He rather concluded that the chaotic situation of his own time "was bound to lead towards the formation of large political and economic units, and it was just the minor nations, like the Hungarians, with no kinsmen in Europe, for whom this transformation was to provide advantages, so they should do their best to support this transition".

Wells detested Rumanian, German and Slav nationalism alike, and in order to counterbalance it he described a "state organisation uniting economically the whole of Europe, and perhaps later the whole of the world, providing free development to the racial identity of the nations included". He cited as instances Brand's concept of a United States of Europe and the pan-European ideas of Codenhove, adding that Lord Rothermere should have raised the problem of Hungarian revision as part of a general European plan. He regarded the elimination of the "fetish" of national frontiers as a more general and humanistic solution, to be attained by a "revolution" headed by the intelligent community of the world, which might be comprised of workers or aristocrats. A community which believed firmly in a "world order based on a more just equality and less significant national and social tension, rather on more plentiful affection and solidarity".⁶ At that time this peaceful way of tackling the problem seemed an unrealistic and even utopian alternative. Wells's plea to the Hungarian nation to accept the Trianon peace treaty was naïve at least.

Wells's apostolic manifesto provoked an immediate, furious, reply from the parliamentarian Albert Berzeviczy in the following edition of *Pesti Napló*.⁷ There is no trace in this article of polite words in praise of Wells, and no mention is made of his political and literary merits and achievements, let alone any description of him as – in the term Kiss had used – "the most popular writer in the world"⁸ In this bitter

⁶ Ferenc Kiss. a világ legnépszerűbb írója elmondja őszinte véleményét a magyar revíziós propagandáról." *Pesti Napló*. 293 (1930): 7-8.

⁷ Albert Berzeviczy. "H.G. Wells Magyarországról." *Pesti Napló*. 294 (1930): 7.

⁸ Ferenc Kiss. a világ legnépszerűbb írója elmondja őszinte véleményét a magyar revíziós propagandáról." *Pesti Napló*. 293 (1930): 7-8.

attack, Berzeviczy was reluctant to accept a day-dream whilst millions of Hungarians were oppressed on the other side of the border. In the first part of the article Wells is accused of ignorance – and not without justification. He is condemned because he had claimed in his article of 1927 that he was tired of the dozens of leaflets saturated with the "Hungarian truth". "Nowadays," he had written, "people are much too busy to pay attention to the everlasting Hungarian complaints, and see no reason why they should be interested just in the injustice being suffered by the Hungarian and why Europe should be liable to remedy the painful Hungarian wounds." Wells advised against any attempt to draw the world into a crusade to move the Hungarian-Rumanian border 20 or 50 kilometers to the east or west.

The patriotic tone of Berzeviczy's words changes to indignation, and he turns to an attack on the apostle of the World State. "Perhaps," he begins, "if the only problems to be tackled were economic ones, the pan-European plans of Briand, Codenhove and Wells could help, but here our national integrity is at risk. The new Rumanian regime wants to demagyarize three and a half million Hungarians living on the other side of the border." He goes on to argue that the underlying aim of the Briand plan was to maintain and stabilise the articles of the peace treaties. In order to gain British public sympathy, Byron and Lord Rothermere are mentioned in the context that the British have always considered it their duty to protect truth and national rights. He revives memories of the warm welcome the Hungarian politician Lajos Kossuth received in Great Britain and the USA and praises British public opinion for having given such hearty support to the of the Hungarian politician Ferenc Deák's statement in 1861. But, he continues:

even if it is true that the British are nowadays unaffected by the Hungarian cause, it must be recalled that Hungary was not dismembered as a result of conquest; Rumanian and Serbian troops occupied the country 'like vultures devouring a carcass' after Mihály Károlyi and Linder had disarmed the Hungarians. Hungary lost two thirds of its territory, not by conquest but because of the peace treaty of Versailles, the masterminders of which had accepted the false information provided by the Czechs, the Rumanians and the Serbians without even listening to the opinion of the other involved nations.

And among the decision-makers there were Britons as well, Lloyd George for example, and therefore Great Britain was also responsible for the injustice he, Berzeviczy, considered had been suffered by Hungary. "If Great Britain was ready to condemn us, let it equally be ready to remedy our just claims." Finally, Berzeviczy stressed that the Hungarian nation expected Wells to give up his neutral stance on the

Hungarian cause. Berzeviczy appears to have been right in his view of Wells posing in the role of an internationalist. The fundamental nature of Wells's own patriotism came to light when he urged that the English should hit back in the same way during the German bombardment of English towns.⁹ When the existence of his own nation was at risk he gave up resounding phrases and demanded merciless bomb attacks.

Countess Bethlen's persistent opposition to Wellsian cosmopolitanism was the first, still relatively polite, negative response that forecast the unfavourable Hungarian public reaction. Wells's ignorance and his readiness to speak out, rashly claiming competence in questions where in fact he was merely dilettante, led him into a rather unpleasant situation. His publicly expressed opinion received widespread condemnation in Hungary. Instead of acknowledging his ignorance, Wells could not refrain from expressing his ideas on his World State in the Hungarian press at the very time that Hungarians were pleading with European public opinion for a renegotiation of the fatal peace treaty that threatened their national existence. The fact that the problem of the Hungarian revision meant no more to Wells than a modification of the borders by 20 or 50 kilometres simply reflects public opinion in Western Europe at that time on the Hungarian revision, an opinion which has remained unchanged ever since. We can only feel deeply sorry that Wells's well-meaning ideas and the just cause of the Hungarian revision could not get to the ground of common understanding. The great novelist from a nation accustomed to winning world wars and dictating conditions of peace treaties could not understand let alone remedy the painful wounds of the present when on his remote horizon loomed the tragic future of human kind – a future which he sought to avert by all means at his disposal.

In our day, at the very end of the twentieth century, Wells's ideas seem still almost as utopic as when he wrote the article discussed above, and the wounds of the Hungarian nation are nearly as painful as they were. His ideas, however sincere and full of good faith remain still to be carried out in the remote future, just as the Hungarians are as far as ever from the achievement of their objective. Not even today could the theoretically utopian-internationalist but practically British Wells make his World State ideas popular in Hungary by calling the nation to give up its desire to regain lost territories, nor could they reconcile the irreconcilability of internationalism and nationalism.

⁹ Unsigned. "Az a hír érkezett..." *Protesans Szemle* (1940): 91-92.