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Comments on Laurence Cole's article

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The following text is a series of comments on Laurence Cole's article entitled *Leo Valiani's "La dissoluzione dell'Austria-Ungheria" in Historiographical context*, presented in this issue of the West Croatian History Journal.

It is unsurprising that the best assessment of Leo Valiani's major work should have come from a foreign scholar, albeit a scholar with an excellent knowledge of the Italian historiographical context. Valiani always remained an outsider in Italian historiography. Not a 'towering outsider' (as E. H. Carr once labelled Lewis Namier), but a plain outsider. In Italy Valiani's claim to fame – such as it may have ever existed – rested basically on two achievements: his long-standing association with two Italian weeklies, *Il Mondo* and *L'Espresso*, for which he regularly reviewed history books in the 1950s-1970s; and his presence on the Editorial Board of the *Rivista storica italiana*. In both cases Valiani's presence was due more to past political affiliations to the *Partito d'Azione* and later the *Partito Radicale*. Since Valiani never entered academia, Italian academic historians did not feel obliged to pay excessive homage to him. His topics were in any case of limited interest to Italian historiography. Angelo Ara – one of the very few Italian specialists of the Habsburg Monarchy – was one of the exceptions to this general attitude.

Valiani's interest in the fall of the monarchy stemmed from a fairly straightforward factor: it belonged to what E. J. Hobsbawm termed "a twilight zone between history and memory; between the past as a generalized record which is open to relatively dispassionate inspection and the past as a remembered part, or background to, one's own life". The collapse of the monarchy occurred when Valiani was barely 9 years old, but his lifelong connection with Hungary (and his command of the Hungarian language) ensured that this event was crucial in his personal, political and historiographical experience. Valiani's experience put him apart from the traditional diplomatic and international history of the time, but also from the historiographical Left of the time. Only after the demise of the Prague Spring and the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 did Italian Communist historians enter the field of Eastern European history (which until that time had been considered a purely political affair, a preserve for Party leaders). (Hobsbawm made a point, throughout his life, of steering clear from any topic concerning Eastern Europe). In earlier moments of his life, Valiani toyed with the idea of writing a history of Hungary, but the initial draft went lost during the war. As Cole reminds us, it is likely that the Rome Congress of the International Committee of Historical Sciences

in 1955 stimulated a more concrete plan to write a history of the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy. In those years he established (or re-established) connections with Yugoslav and Hungarian historians. By the time the revival of interest in Habsburg history took off with the Bloomington Conference (1966) and Bratislava Conference (1967) Valiani had already published his work on the topic (at first in instalments in the *Rivista storica italiana*, then as a book, in 1966). That, in a sense, is the end of the story. The second, enlarged edition, which came out in 1985, passed largely unnoticed, in Italy and elsewhere.

The importance of the Hungarian aspect of Valiani's work is worth stressing. This is not because Valiani expressed any particular inclination towards any Hungarian national point of view. It is, rather, for the fact that Hungarian historiography, because of the heritage of the territories of the Crown of St Stephen, has generally had to adapt a broad East-Central European perspective (unlike, say, Polish historiography, which can afford to remain polono-centric when it chooses to be so). Oszkar Jászi is a good instance. C. A. Macartney –one of the greatest historians of the Habsburg Monarchy– was not actually a Hungarian, but was as close as he could be to a Hungarian perspective. There has never been any shortage of Polish, Czech and Slovak historians of the Monarchy, but Hungarian historians always had to come to terms with the Monarchy as a whole. Interestingly, for Valiani, who was distantly related to Theodore Herzl, Jewish identity never meant much, despite the efforts of later interviewers to uncover such an identity. Weiczen was first an internationalist, then a revolutionary democrat, and finally an Italian Liberal. If ever he rediscovered an identity, it was that of a *fiumano*.

During the discussion at the Rijeka conference on Weiczen/Valiani, Rok Stergar made a highly relevant point. While Stergar is a historian from below of World War I, he still wondered how much history from below actually mattered (and matters) if, at the end of the day, war is decided from above, and apparently everyone –at the history from below level– falls into line and marches to the trenches. (This is, of course, a somewhat simplified version of Stergar's remarks). With characteristic seriousness and integrity, Stergar raises a key issue: historical contingency. When does the possibility of a collapse of the monarchy become an inevitability? Different answers can be given, depending of the focus of research, ranging from a neo-episodic view (which may still prove commercially highly successful), to a variety of long-term perspectives.

It may be useful to remember how a contemporary observer saw the process unfolding (in Isaiah Berlin's later recollection):

'I remember', said Namier to me, 'the day in 1918 when the Emperor Karl sued for peace. I said to Headlam-Morley: 'Wait'. Headlam-Morley said to Balfour: 'Wait'. Balfour said to Lloyd George: 'Wait'. Lloyd George said to Wilson: 'Wait'. And while they waited, the Austro-Hungarian Empire

disintegrated. I may say that I pulled it to pieces with my own hands" (I. Berlin, "Remembering Namier", *Encounter*, xxvii [1966]).

This is not, of course the ultimate explanation of the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy. But it is certainly part of it.