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The Biology of War: Eugenics in Hungary, 1914–1918

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Introduction

Much has been written concerning the impact of World War I on the development of eugenic thinking, especially in Germany, Britain, France, Italy, and the Scandinavian countries.¹ This has led historians to examine not only specific eugenic movements, but also the international nexus of institutional collaboration, personal affinities, and transfer of ideas.² If before 1914, eugenicists from various countries were united in their quest to improve society by biological means—a form of internationalism culminating in the First International Congress on Eugenics organized in 1912 in London—during World War I, many of them engaged in national politics, devising eugenic methodologies to serve the ideological imperatives of their own countries rather than the proclaimed universalism of the prewar years.

Regrettably, such intensive research was not commensurate with an interest in widening the geographical compass of this scholarship, as the study of eugenics in many countries in Central and Eastern Europe remained until very recently unexplored.³ Accordingly, this article looks at debates on eugenics in Hungary during World War I, their ideological nature and methodological affinity to eugenic movements elsewhere. Hungary presents an interesting and revealing case study in the history of eugenics. It was well connected to eugenics developments in Britain, Germany, and the United States; however, it maintained particular features as a result of its specific historical traditions and geographical location.⁴ An understanding of the interrelation between various models of eugenics and their adaptation to specific national contexts is a precondition for an assessment of the actual influence of eugenic ideas in general and in Hungary in particular.

“Few states glorified the military as much as did Austria-Hungary before the Great War.”⁵ István Deák’s perceptive comment fittingly complements the practical engagement of the Dual Monarchy during the war. Indeed, around 8 million soldiers were mobilized in 1914, out of which around 3.8 million were Hungarian citizens.⁶ Yet, contrary to this remarkable exhibit of human resources, the military outcomes were disastrous, prompting the same scholar to argue that “The losses suffered in Galicia and Serbia were so enormous that the army would have dwindled by the end of 1914 had there been no replacements.”⁷ One direct result of these military defeats was the conscription of reservists and militarily untrained civilians, a practice that, in turn, contributed to the lowering of physical standards of those drafted for the army, the elimination of several categories of exemption, and the extension of military obligation from ages 21–42 to 18–50.⁸ This substantial human mobilization also had significant impact on the economy and social relations of the country. As military conscriptions increased, Hungary faced severe labor shortages and an accelerated decline of its agriculture, trade, and industry. Economic difficulties fueled both social antagonism and political radicalism, contributing to an atmosphere of civil and national unrest.⁹

Largely as a result of the demographic changes brought about by the war did the Hungarian political elite turn to eugenics as a means to promote social and biological revival amidst a disillusioning political environment. Social reformers and eugenicists, in turn, alerted the government to the need for a rigorous health policy integrating hygienic and eugenic

principles. What ensued was an intense debate not only about the health of the nation and the protection of society, but also ultimately about national survival. It was, in fact, during the war that, for the first time, eugenics extended beyond scholarly debates and infiltrated Hungarian public and political discourses.

As all concerned soon came to realize after 1914, the war had not only reconfigured national politics and international relations, but also afforded the various contemporary theories of heredity a new significance. Any substantive understanding of the eugenic milieu as it emerged in World War I Hungary must necessarily be grounded in a discussion of the most prominent theoretical perceptions of the war and the milieu's impact on society as these perceptions were put forward by diverse Hungarian authors, including Zsigmond Fülöp, Lajos Méhely, Mihály Lenhossék, Géza von Hoffmann, and István Apáthy. The discussion of these authors will not merely outline their work, but will also demonstrate how eugenic theories may be usefully understood in the context of wartime conditions. In the second part of the article, I examine the practical application of eugenic principles, stressing those moments where physicians were predominantly active, as with combating epidemics, protecting mothers and infants and reintegrating injured soldiers and veterans into society and the nation.

Ultimately the question came down to what eugenic measures were necessary to counteract the negative effects of war and how to translate these measures into viable policies. Within this context, the establishment of the Hungarian Society for Racial Hygiene and Population Policy and the National Welfare Office for Disabled Servicemen in 1917 signified the increased interest in eugenics among diverse categories of professionals and political elites. Its foundation was a concerted effort to allow health reformers, eugenicists, and population policy advisers to articulate common programs of hygienic and racial protectionism. The result was not only a widespread diffusion of eugenic ideas, but also a form of scientism that sought to mobilize the population in accordance with a new nationalist order, one that would supposedly replace the obsolete imperial framework of Austria-Hungary. Eventually, this scientism also subsumed forms of radical politics, including racism and anti-Semitism, under a nationalist narrative that chronicled the war's crucial role in creating a new Hungarian society after 1918.

Theoretical Approaches Pugnacious Instincts: War and Darwinism

World War I nurtured an extraordinary proliferation of eugenic arguments.¹⁰ Such a literature had already emerged in the nineteenth century as a biologically informed response to social problems perceived as endemic to industrialized societies. The prewar years had witnessed the ideological consolidation of eugenics and its positioning at the intersection of various scientific disciplines, such as sociology and anthropology, and political ideologies, such as racism and nationalism.¹¹ Eugenics strived to address and solve a range of demographic and hereditary issues linked to the alleged deterioration of the nation's biological condition.

Eugenicists feared both the adverse consequences of declining fertility rates and the equally detrimental effects of the increased number, visibility, and fiscal costs of disabled individuals on society. The relentless exposition of these anxieties during the war contributed to the growing prestige eugenics and its solutions to demographic and social crises eventually enjoyed. Nonetheless, these eugenic arguments, relevant as they were for countries afflicted by war, were often couched in a nationalist rhetoric about racial supremacy and survival. In addition to occasioning the introduction of social and medical policies dealing with particular groups, eugenics generated a resurgence of nationalist concerns about the deterioration of the nation's racial qualities.

Establishing the effects of war on race and nation was a central component of early-twentieth-century eugenic theories. Eugenicists, however, were divided over the issue of whether war itself was beneficial or detrimental to social and national progress. Some argued that war perfectly illustrated processes of natural selection in social and national spheres, whereas others argued that war led to the elimination of the physically and psychologically healthy and allowed the “weak” to increase in number and to determine the biological destiny of future generations. The German eugenicist Alfred Ploetz (1860–1940) had pointed to the dysgenic effects of war as early as 1895 and subsequently proposed that the “worst individuals” be drafted into military service in order for “healthy individuals to be saved.”¹² That eugenicists largely shared this view became evident after 1914, when prominent eugenic journals such as *The Eugenics Review*, the *Journal of Heredity*, and the *Archiv für Rassen und Gesellschaftsbiologie* dedicated numerous articles to the relationship between war and eugenics. One characteristic example of the arguments put forward by eugenicists fearing that war was ultimately detrimental to the biological improvement of human societies is provided by an anonymous contribution to *The Lancet* in 1916, in which the author bluntly declared: “War is antagonistic to eugenics.”¹³

Other authors, however, deemed war to be the pinnacle of human evolution, a mechanism through which to regulate overpopulation and the demand for economic resources. As the rhetoric of biological pessimism grew throughout Europe and the United States around 1900, these authors asserted that war was the ultimate illustration of national potency. War, these authors claimed, was effective in mobilizing the racial abilities of the nation, while simultaneously counteracting physical degeneration, racial miscegenation, and ultimately proved the superiority of one race over another in the perpetual struggle for survival.¹⁴ Following the distressing impact the Boer War in South Africa (1899–1902) had on the British perception of national health, the leading British eugenicist and biometrician Karl Pearson (1857–1936), for example, notably commended the positive functions of war and its redeeming features of sacrifice and racial purification.¹⁵

In 1917, the German physiologist Georg Friedrich Nicolai (1874–1964) attempted to synthesize these conflicting interpretations of war in *The Biology of War*, a paean to pacifism. German authorities consequently banned the book.¹⁶ Not denying the importance of the Darwinian struggle for existence, Nicolai nevertheless perceived war to be a destructive plague to which national chauvinism and ideas of racial preservation, especially in Germany, had directly contributed. Reviewing the book in Hungary, the natural historian Zsigmond Fülöp (1882–1948) disputed that war was solely the result of nationalism and racism. Fülöp deemed it necessary that war also be explained from a biological point of view, as hitherto most explanations were historical and cultural. In Fülöp’s opinion, these theories “significantly contributed—not only in Hungary, but all over the world—to the narcotization of the masses with the idea of war.”¹⁷ What Fülöp required was “more profound critical biological research”¹⁸ when dealing with the subject of war.

Fülöp’s main argument was that “the instincts of self-preservation and race preservation are the two greatest processes that dominate everything, every aspect of life and actions of every living creature.”¹⁹ He hence redefined what Nicolai had identified as “the war instinct.” “Common sense,” Fülöp noted, “would certainly not say that war could, in any way, serve the self-preservation of individuals. Moreover, the war instinct is absurd even to think about, as it contradicts the first and foremost human instinct, namely the instinct of self-preservation.”²⁰ Therefore, war was declared “a biological absurdity,” for causing the death of individuals and, by extension, leading to racial extinction. “The war instinct,” Fülöp concluded “has nothing to do with race preservation.”²¹

Such insistence on the salience of race was fueled partly by Fülöp's Darwinist worldview and partly by an increasingly widespread tendency among Hungarian scientists to use racial imagery when discussing the impact of war. The Darwinist biologist Lajos Méhely (1879–1953) was one of the most outspoken opponents of what he perceived as naive interpretations of war not only at the level of practical politics, but also anthropologically and biologically. In his *The Biology of War*, a crude analysis of war as seen through the prism of the struggle for existence published in 1915,²² Méhely forcefully argued against those who failed to understand the aggressive tendencies in human nature that were driven by an instinctive drive for survival and an endemic fear of extinction. Méhely proposed that “similar to animals, human species, races and nations live in constant competition and strife”²³ and explained that “as soon as a species or population finds itself in the threshold of being or non-existence, war sets in with utter cruelty.”²⁴ An avid supporter of biological militarism, Méhely hence offered a theory of historical conflict based on genetic determinants and biological laws. Those who asserted that “the struggle for life in its Darwinist form” did not exist in society were ultimately refuted by “twenty million heavily armed individuals getting ready to kill each other in all corners of the Earth.”²⁵

Méhely invested the war with its own laws allegedly derived from the natural world: “war is not a human invention but a regular aspect of organic life.”²⁶ Appropriating Darwin's view that “if man wishes to reach further, then the intensity of his struggle must not dwindle, or else he will sink into inert indifference and helplessness,”²⁷ Méhely gave his own interpretation of the struggle for existence and its role in shaping modern warfare: “The tranquillity of world peace would also be the tranquillity of death; war will exist as long as there is life and a living human being on Earth, because [the] *human race is still in the phase of continuous development and war is nothing else but the stepping-stone of evolution.*”²⁸ Méhely's supplementary emphasis on biological morality opposed so-called humanist theories of war, namely, those that considered “the noble actions of the human spirit and the wonderful creations of the human mind to be self-sufficient; nevertheless in the light of biology *all these values are mere resources*, which decide the survival of peoples and nations during the time of war, the greatest test of the struggle for life.”²⁹

Méhely invoked war to foster nationalism, but he similarly praised it for the biological rejuvenation it entailed. Patriotism, Méhely believed, was in retreat in a society overwhelmed by intellectualism and contemptuous of discipline and self-sacrifice. Being formed in the trenches was a new generation of nationalists, a generation that was racially healthy and willing to sacrifice itself in the service of a greater cause. War, in other words, was intrinsically bound to the human condition; it was an opportunity for both spiritual and physical renewal, seen as the antidote to degeneration and the chance to increase the biological qualities of the nation. As Méhely insisted, natural selection prompted by war would eliminate “the pale, the weak, the nervous and, from a military point of view, a simply valueless generation.”³⁰ The result will, according to Méhely, be “the breeding of patriotic, strong-willed, disciplined and bodily strong generations of citizens.”³¹

But who were the “the pale, the weak, [and] the nervous” individuals inviting Méhely's opprobrium? Méhely did not point at any particular ethnic group or social milieu, but his contemporaries knew only too well whom his nationalist diatribes targeted. As scholars of twentieth-century anti-Semitism have long documented, some of the most potent images employed by anti-Semitic authors were those associated with alleged Jewish mental and biological degeneration.³² As Méhely's nationalist vision indicates, the Jew came to symbolize the degenerate intellectual whose inability to completely identify with Hungarian patriotism translated into various anti-Semitic accusations, including allegations that a great number of Jews had avoided military services in favor of “exploiting the labor of the civilian population.”³³

The Jews hence became, as so often, directly responsible for the people's dire living conditions and for undermining the war effort.³⁴

Having established this distinction between "strong" and "weak" Hungarians, Méhely additionally implied that only a new nationalist morality based on the primacy of race would offer the Hungarians the prominent role among the nations of Europe they deserved: "From a national point of view, our war has already brought us a valuable result—namely that Hungarians are greatly respected by the peoples of the monarchy and by our German ally as well—which is a token of a better future."³⁵ War, he ultimately accepted, was often inhumane; "yet we are proud to look forward because we feel that our nation will emerge purged, consolidated, and enriched with great moral values from the flames of war."³⁶ Unapologetic in his insistence that war was beneficial to the Hungarian nation, Méhely concluded enthusiastically that "[m]ost of the heroes [...] rest in peace in foreign ground now, yet the light of their spirit illuminates our path and will lead us in the sublime work of our new conquest."³⁷ Ultimately, war was both an instrument of collective selection and the test of the nation's social fitness and morality.

For many Hungarians this was not merely an allegory, but the gruesome truth as, for example, the Austro-Hungarian monarchy lost nearly 800,000 soldiers in the spring of 1915, many of whom were Hungarians assigned to the 5th and 11th Honvéd and to the 10th Common Hussar divisions.³⁸ Although the military situation improved following victories over the Russian army in July and August, the Austro-Hungarian casualties continued to mount, adding another half a million soldiers by the end of 1915.³⁹ Such terrible losses may have curtailed the enthusiasm of many pro-war intellectuals and politicians; yet these victories also brought with them a renewed sense of salvation.⁴⁰

This growing confidence in the military might of the Central Powers subsequently furthered the publication of various new interpretations of the relationship between war and human societies. The respected neurologist Mihály Lenhossék (1863–1937) offered one in his 1915 article "War and the Theme of Positive Struggle for Life."⁴¹ Subscribing to the Darwinist idea of natural selection and to the Spencerian notion of "the survival of the fittest," Lenhossék shared Méhely's conviction that war could enhance social and national cohesion and could provide the platform for emerging patriotic sentiments of sacrifice and devotion to the national community: "War awakes, develops, and brings out noble qualities, and virtues of the human soul. War brings hearts closer in self-sacrifice, patriotism and mutual support."⁴²

Yet, by postulating war as the product of "civilization" and "culture" rather than heredity, Lenhossék distanced himself from Méhely's biological determinism. He even hoped that civilization would eventually generate its natural immunity to war, "just like human organism produces both self-hazardous poisons and their antidotes."⁴³ Although Lenhossék recognized that endemic warfare among nations and races had been an important selective force in human history, he did not view war in terms of instinctive pugnacity and warned that modern military conflicts were dysgenic because they wasted the "best blood" of the nation on the battlefield.

Subsequent military campaigns confirmed Lenhossék's somber investigation. The Russian offensive of June 1916 lost the Austro-Hungarian monarchy another 1.5 million soldiers (including 400,000 taken prisoner), making it painfully clear that the nation's best were being heroically sacrificed in the trenches. Moreover, when Hungary's hitherto neutral neighbors Italy and Romania entered war on the side of the Entente in 1915 and 1916, respectively, it became increasingly apparent that the war was fought less to avenge the death of an Austrian prince and more to ensure territorial and national aggrandizement.

War and Eugenics

Méhely's straightforward and unequivocal Darwinist assertion that Hungary could only benefit from war might appear to repudiate Fülöp and Lenhossék's accounts; but, in fact, these authors did not differ fundamentally in their treatment of the biological problems affecting the Hungarian nation during the war. Once it became clear that Méhely's prediction of a ruthless war for racial survival was not mere pessimism, other eugenicists—although not sharing Méhely's glorification of war—began to assess the conflict's impact more seriously. Apart from Lenhossék, Géza von Hoffmann and István Apáthy were among those who documented the racial disadvantages brought about by war and who, at the same time, passionately defended the role of eugenics in protecting the nation from worsening hygienic conditions and demographic decline.

Where Méhely glorified war's beneficial influence on the race, Géza von Hoffmann (1885–1921) discussed its detrimental effects. Drawing upon rising fears of racial degeneration and the declining health of the population, Hoffmann offered provocative evaluations of the consequences resulting from drafting the community's healthy members. Both Fülöp and Lenhossék had alluded to war's dysgenic effects on future generations; Hoffmann, however, placed these at the centre of his eugenic theory of war. In a 1916 article, for instance, he considered “the hereditary effects of war” at both the international and national levels.⁴⁴ Hoffmann considered racial determinism as the “basis of historical evolution,” explaining that it was “only natural” that the superior nation triumphed over inferior ones. Yet, his was no biological militarism. Hoffmann portrayed war as having “a damaging effect” on the nations involved in conflict, because “the strongest, healthiest, and bravest men fall victims to war while sick, weak, and cowardly ones survive and produce offspring.”⁴⁵

Hoffmann used most insistently one notion in particular to describe the dysgenic effects of war: the biological capital of future generations. Ever since Francis Galton (1822–1911) had coined the term “eugenics” in 1883, protecting the racial quality of future generations constituted one of the key forces driving both positive and negative race-hygienic policy proposals. Consequently, Hoffmann made a concerted effort to express this issue clearly when he wrote that “from the point of view of the race—and we should always keep this in mind—the damage [caused by war] originates not only in the death of individuals, who are mortal anyway, but in the loss of the capability to reproduce and the long line of unborn generations.”⁴⁶ Moreover, reflecting the eugenic focus on reproduction, Hoffmann also centered his argument on interventionist state policies to assure racial efficiency. He declared these policies were “of utmost importance to provide for the necessary number of quality descendants.”⁴⁷ Instituting a coherent domestic policy of family planning needed to be complemented by an equally efficient demographic policy, not least because the Hungarians, Hoffmann claimed, were “surrounded by hostile peoples, whose fertility is higher than ours.”⁴⁸

Hoffmann then put forward various policies on race protectionism, including the regulation of internal migration and colonization. With respect to the former, Hoffmann argued in favor of establishing a balance that promoted those individuals considered “desirable as citizens of the state” and removing those “who from an individual, racial, or political point of view are harmful to the community.”⁴⁹ This distinction between “desirable” and “detrimental” individuals is equally apparent in Hoffmann's approach to colonization. He proposed a rural settlement policy, defined as: “the core of the Hungarian race is the peasantry, thus we must cultivate and propagate this layer. Colonization serves this objective.”⁵⁰ According to Hoffmann, only the healthy and fertile were to be chosen as prospective settlers. “To colonize with individuals,” Hoffmann revealed, “who are incapable of proper reproduction or who simply do not want to procreate would be a disproportionately costly charity with

absolutely no regard for the future.”⁵¹ Both the social and economic transformations of the nation were to be driven through projects of eugenic renewal. As Hoffmann emphasized, “only measures which consider the coming generations can be of lasting value.”⁵²

These arguments resurfaced forcefully in Hoffmann’s 1916 *War and Racial Hygiene*. In the first part of the book, Hoffmann dealt with the mechanisms of “national extinction” as brought about by a war leaving insufficient descendents and hence aggravating the ensuing demographic decline. Admittedly, it was a pessimist vision; but war, Hoffmann reiterated, amounted to a “total annihilation of peoples.”⁵³ After describing the counterselective consequences of warfare, Hoffmann, in the second part of his book, discussed the two-pronged “influence of war and culture on race,” namely, the selection of nations internationally and internal selection within the nation itself.⁵⁴ Hoffmann lamented that war had exposed the combatant states to various forms of biological and racial extinction, obstructing population growth and producing a dysgenic effect on the hereditary constitution of the European nations. Hoffmann then proceeded to assess the “racial burden” and “degeneration” war had on the nation’s “genetic stock,” arguing for the protection of marriage, the introduction of prophylactic measures against venereal diseases and, especially, the discouragement of “inferior people” from reproduction.⁵⁵ Hoffmann believed that the “welfare of the race” necessitated an “unrelenting struggle for existence,”⁵⁶ as it offered the only way to protect the race from the destructive consequences of war.

This form of race protectionism required that eugenics be given the leading role in the process of national recovery, seconded by an equally well articulated population policy. And, as the damages caused by war increased, Hoffmann insisted that broader segments of the political elite and the population be made aware of the importance of these policies. Without a significant expansion of public awareness, the negative effects of the war would, in turn, result in a profound national crisis. Hoffmann’s aspiration to mobilize public opinion so that it acquired “a racial hygienic way of thinking” was fully exploited in the last part of the book, which dealt with the methodology of racial hygiene.⁵⁷ Considering that Europe faced a difficult present and an uncertain future, Hoffmann presented those racial hygiene measures he deemed necessary for “the recovery of the race” after the war. As his combative language attests, he thought immediate action was necessary, especially with respect to the stability of family structures and the “love of future generations.”⁵⁸

After outlining his methodology, Hoffmann then discussed diverse practical eugenic strategies, which he grouped into “quantitative and qualitative” categories, with the latter further divided into “positive and negative” forms. Positive racial hygiene promoted the “breeding of those superior,” whereas negative eugenics “impeded the reproduction of those inferior.”⁵⁹ Two countries served as prominent examples, the United States and Germany. If the former was the herald of “qualitative” racial hygiene, having already introduced measures to “prevent the reproduction of the inferior,” the latter was largely preoccupied with “quantitative” racial hygiene. Only recently, Hoffmann remarked critically, had German eugenicists turned towards “qualitative” racial policies. To illustrate this point, he detailed the activities of the German Society for Racial Hygiene, including its “furthering of internal colonization with privileges of succession in favor of large families”; the “abolition, as far as possible, of certain impediments to marriage”; the “legal regulation of procedures in cases necessitating abortion or sterilization”; and, finally, “awakening a national mind ready to bring sacrifices, and a sense of duty towards coming generations.”⁶⁰

For these measures to be adopted in Hungary, eugenics had to be institutionalized. The architects of this process—enthusiastic eugenicists like Hoffmann—emphasized that the purification of society and its biological continuity depended upon the transmission of new racial codes and mentalities to the general public. Here, the example of North American

eugenics reigned supreme. For Hoffmann, only in the United States was “the highest earthly goal: the future welfare of the race” fully integrated into social and health policies.⁶¹ This notion of racial survival provided the standard against which the fitness of the nation was to be evaluated, and this is exactly what the respected biologist István Apáthy (1863–1922) endeavored to achieve in his 1918 article on “The Domain and Task of Racial Hygiene.”⁶²

From the outset, Apáthy refuted Méhely’s argument that war exemplified the application of natural selection to society and suggested a more rigorous methodology when dealing with the relationship between racial hygiene and war. Arguing that Darwin’s theory of evolution should enhance “social morality” rather than generate military conflict, Apáthy declared that “war is in all respects the very opposite of what we call natural selection.”⁶³ However, as a Darwinist, Apáthy agreed that war was an important element in human history: “I will even concede that human development required wars in the past. But let everyone open his eyes and see that at the present stage of human development, human culture, administration, and technical knowledge, war is not necessity but sheer madness.”⁶⁴ War and racial hygiene were ultimately incompatible because, as Apáthy suggested, “no step forward can be made in the field of racial hygiene until mankind is freed from the present war and the specter of another war.”⁶⁵

It is at this critical junction that Apáthy inserted his critique of war: the majority of those “mentally and physically superior, of whom we could have expected excellent offspring” were decimated, whereas “inferior individuals, who will only weaken the physical and psychological average of the coming generations” were left to procreate.⁶⁶ Aware of the precarious state of international relations during the war, Apáthy was nothing short of visionary when he asked: “How may we dare start to nurture the good crests of a new forest from remaining good scions, when perhaps after two or three decades a new and more devastating war comes and destroys the sturdiest trunks once again?”⁶⁷ Modern war, Apáthy was convinced, was “exactly the opposite of what we call natural selection” and “of racial hygiene.” Similarities between the two notwithstanding—both performed a similar function, namely, the selection of the fittest members of the species—war had nevertheless a devastating effect on the biological qualities of future generations.

Like Hoffmann, Apáthy was concerned with the demographic decline prompted by war and pointed out that “war has made many prospective fathers eugenically inapt for procreation.”⁶⁸ New eugenic policies were needed, both positive and negative, and Apáthy complained that “we do not yet have ways to prevent those who are inapt from becoming mothers and fathers.” In the absence of such policies, Apáthy recommended a focus on public education: “We must not forget,” Apáthy summarized, “*that the health of the race requires not only physical, but moral health as well. If public health might be satisfied by minding physical health, racial hygiene must look after mental health and public morality alike.*”⁶⁹

Returning to eugenics in a lengthy article entitled “Races and Eugenics,” Lenhossék similarly tried to separate eugenics from racial determinism.⁷⁰ On the one hand, he grouped eugenics and nationalism in distinct categories. “Eugenics is not the same as the love of one’s race or patriotism,” Lenhossék maintained.⁷¹ On the other hand, he detached eugenics from ideas of racial superiority: “one cannot talk of eugenics when it is suggested that one race, based on its historical rights, should survive or be above other races.”⁷² Lenhossék similarly condemned all forms of “racial arrogance,” indicating that the German, French, British, and Yugoslav nationalists had unjustifiably claimed “racial supremacy for their own races, an extreme racial consciousness which the war amplified by inspiring reciprocal hate and antipathy.”⁷³

In response to these forms of racism, Lenhossék regarded eugenics as an applied discipline capable of making a valuable contribution to national betterment without resorting to racist arguments. “Our national eugenics,” he continued, “can have only one goal: to strengthen the nation, increase its numbers, heal its wounds; to support [it] in its struggle, and to favor the unity of this brave Hungarian nation.”⁷⁴ Lenhossék’s interpretation of the complex interaction between policies of racial improvement and nationalism was enhanced by his concluding comment: “The middle class, the vertebral column of the nation, must be rejuvenated from its infinite resources and enriched from the treasury of the Hungarian nation and of the pure-blood Hungarian peasantry.”⁷⁵ Lenhossék hence revived Hungarian nationalism amidst moments of crises by deeming eugenic measures necessary to strengthen national vitality and resurrect the national body. It was this conviction, along with programs of racial hygiene and national protectionism, that Lenhossék shared with eugenicists like Apáthy and Hoffmann.

These theoretical explorations of the relationship between war and eugenics were intended to provide support for the practical application of racial and hygienic measures. Many of the arguments shared by Fülöp, Méhely, Lenhossék, Hoffmann, and Apáthy were disseminated by the medical profession and politicians alike. Journals as divergent in scope as the *Huszádik Század* (Twentieth Century), *Természettudományi közlöny* (Natural Sciences Bulletin), *Orvosi hetilap* (Medical Weekly), *Egészség* (Health), *Darwin* (Darwin) *Nemzetvédelem* (The Protection of the Nation), and *A Cél* (The Target) were uniformly geared toward disseminating information on social policy, public health, and racial hygiene. Moreover, this growing interest in eugenics registered by the medical profession in Hungary was equally reflected in the activities of the main public organizations dealing with social and medical care during the war, especially the Stefánia Association (*Stefánia Szövetség*), the Hungarian Society for Racial Hygiene and Population Policy (*A Magyar Fajegészségtani és Népesedéspolitikai Társaság*), and the National Welfare Office for Disabled Servicemen (*Országos Hadigondozó Hivatal*), as well as in national conferences on health and hygiene and parliamentary speeches. Eugenicists carefully orchestrated these theoretical debates and propagandistic efforts to achieve, ultimately, the practical codification of their vision of a healthy national body.

Hygienic Ideas into Practice Epidemics, Jews, and Medical Protection

Since the beginning of the war, Hungarian doctors decried the increasing deterioration of the health of the civilian population. The outbreak of a typhus epidemic in Serbia in November 1914 accentuated these anxieties. Hungary was increasingly exposed to the disease due to its geographical proximity and the contact with wounded soldiers returning home.⁷⁶ Some physicians like Zsigmond Somogyi (1888–1970), a specialist in sexually transmitted diseases, and the pathologist Béla Entz (1877–1959) stressed the dangers of epidemics, the spread of pathogens, and the complicated interactions among populations, living conditions, and the environment. Both warned the military authorities and the government that the fight against sexually transmitted diseases and epidemics was a critical part of the fight against the enemy and a vital part of the postwar reconstruction process.⁷⁷ Others, such as the physiologist Géza Farkas (1872–1934), were equally concerned about nutrition during the war or about the side effects such as neurasthenia.⁷⁸ Moreover, as the realities of war became more severe in Hungary, new medical concern arose. The pharmacist Lajos Száhlender (1877–1946), for instance, acrimoniously described the war as a lethal biological experiment, condemning the usage of chemical weapons, especially the use of poisonous gas.⁷⁹

Accordingly, disease control programs and epidemiological monitoring were immediately introduced, including arrangements for the transportation of infected soldiers. The ministry

of national defense (*Honvédelmi Minisztérium*) also created special military observation stations in several Hungarian towns (for example, Szatmárnémeti, Miskolc, Kassa, Munkács). These stations were under the leadership of a health commissioner entrusted with preventing the spread of epidemics while attending those contaminated, along with a military officer tasked with enforcing discipline and supervising the implementation of quarantine.⁸⁰

Compared to urban areas, the situation in the countryside was, generally speaking, bleaker because villages (especially those close to the front line) were exposed to the vagaries of warfare to a greater extent. Cases of contagious diseases were to be isolated and treatments administered. From a medical point of view, this was critical to determining the type of treatment necessary. From a military perspective, however, the army's fighting strength should not be depleted by the evacuation of patients. It was, therefore, essential that the medical services had the facilities to enable them to reach accurate, early diagnoses and that the expertise provided by the medical doctors was effectively utilized. In this respect, the involvement of the Hungarian royal defense force (*Honvédség*), and especially of its own medical officers, added supplementary expertise and increased the chances of protecting civilians from epidemics.⁸¹ Establishing effective sanitary control was supported by the creation of military health stations in the combat zone, both permanent and temporary, as well as in the transit sector and in the unaffected regions.⁸²

Creating quarantine zones was one aspect of the fight against the spread of epidemics; medical expertise and availability of physicians and surgeons were other aspects. Captain Charles MacDonald, from the medical reserve corps of the United States Army, for example, praised the efficiency and professionalism he encountered in Hungarian hospitals when serving as the director of the American Red Cross hospital in Budapest in 1915: "I must say that the Austrian and Hungarian surgeons do magnificent work, considering what they have to work with. Many of their young surgeons have been killed off. [...] Their every operation is a skilful piece of dissection. Their technique in the suturing of nerves and reconstruction work in the saving of shattering limbs is unsurpassed."⁸³

Aside from epidemics, there was another reason for alarm in 1915. As the Russian troops advanced on the eastern front, thousands of Galician Jews entered Hungary. This exodus of Jewish refugees had social, economic, and political implications.⁸⁴ By and large, these Jews were poor, illiterate, and some exclusively Yiddish speakers; they were also easily identifiable due to their traditional dress, physical appearance, and specific cultural practices.⁸⁵ For local and central authorities dealing with this influx of population, issues of health became as important as living conditions and housing. Although the majority of these refugees were repatriated to Galicia and other Austrian provinces in 1915 and 1916, many chose to apply for extended residency in Hungary. In many cases, Hungarian authorities investigated both the health and the hygienic knowledge of the applicants. As Rebekah Klein-Pejšová pointed out, "This concern went beyond the usual screenings for illness and disease which accompanied refugee movement and sojourn as a matter of course, to the examination of day-to-day personal hygiene. Personal hygiene was a leading factor in the Minister of the Interior's decisions to accept or reject the right of residency applications submitted by Austrian Jewish refugees."⁸⁶ Those rejected were often deemed "a risk to public health."⁸⁷

Questions of preventive medicine and prophylaxis aside, these efforts to combat epidemics and contain the arrival of Jewish refugees illustrate how paramount the concern with the health of the population had become by 1916. During the war, medical experts were catapulted to the forefront of national politics, assisting government officials and lobbying

for the implementation of their hygienic ideas. To this end, many of them increased their political activism, as well as the commitment to social hygiene and eugenics.

The Protection of Future Generations

To illustrate this eugenic activism, it may be worth discussing further some eugenic ideas concerning health care for mothers and infants. A child protection league (*Gyermekvédelő Liga*) had been established in Budapest in 1906 by the lawyers and child reformers Sándor Karsai (1868–1926) and Lipót Edelsheim-Gyulai (1863–1928), with the latter serving as its president. As hereditarian language increasingly shaped debates on fertility, healthy children, and on their social protection, it also underpinned new nationalist discourses that equated large families with a strong nation and compared the one-child system with outdated cultural traditions. Given such concerns, medical experts viewed the protection of future generations both in social and national terms. It justified not only immediate measures against birth control, but also eugenic ideas of national rebirth.⁸⁸

There are two practical dimensions to this issue. First, there was the assessment of hospital facilities, nursing homes, and specialized medical departments. After the outbreak of the war in 1914, eugenicists questioned whether the government was providing adequate medical assistance and maternal care, in addition to proper social assistance and public health programs. Second, there was a growing concern about a decline in birthrates and high infant mortality in Hungary, largely due in equal measure to military conscriptions and falling hygienic conditions. Under the pressure of war, social and health reformers believed that the nation's demographic potential would be seriously undermined unless the state provided coherent policies toward the protection of mothers and infants. The birth of healthy children was increasingly viewed less as an exclusively private matter and more as a matter of major concern to the state.

Reflecting on this situation in an article written in 1915, the prominent gynecologist János Bársony (1860–1926) woefully noted that medical research confirmed claims made by eugenicists that the war had destroyed the “healthy and strong men of the nation.”⁸⁹ Racial fears were hence seemingly justified by statistical evidence about the increasing number of “inferior individuals” (dysgenic elements) among the population. Eugenics, in turn, needed to respond efficiently to wartime challenges and individual traumas. “After the war,” Bársony believed, “eugenics—the doctrine of race improvement—will step into the foreground with full strength.”⁹⁰

Bársony envisioned two techniques to ensure the “recovery of the race.” The first course of action was to increase the birthrate. Before 1914, Hungary's demographic trends were not greatly dissimilar from the general Eastern European pattern of high birthrates, high mortality rates, and a low marriage age, as well as the Western European tendency to limit family size.⁹¹ Yet Bársony took up the issue, attacking the dogmatic approaches to fertility existing in Hungary, especially the one-child system. He bemoaned that “the family with six children is regarded as a rarity of the past, and there are entire regions in which the ‘one-child system’ dominates.”⁹² These regions were located primarily in the Ormánság in southern Transdanubia and were mostly populated by Protestant communities. According to Ildikó Vasary, “a community-wide practice of rigorously controlled fertility”⁹³ had emerged in these regions since the mid nineteenth century, gradually transforming the one-child system from a regional feature into “a political issue, a national problem, an academic puzzle, a mirror reflecting fears for the future of the nation and an opposition propaganda piece.”⁹⁴

It was in this context that a number of important social projects and women's social assistance organizations were founded before and during the war.⁹⁵ Among these, the Social Mission Society (*Szociális Missziótársulat*), established in 1908 by Edith Farkas (1877–1942), deserves to be mentioned. As a Catholic organization, the Mission Society was particularly active during the war, helping mothers and disadvantaged children, as well as organizing moral and financial support for widows. Farkas—like her mentor, the bishop of Székesfehérvár, Ottokár Prohászka (1858–1927)—assigned a specific role to women in society, according to Christian and nationalist principles.

Bársony's eugenics echoed these principles. He criticized birth control methods and deployed a nationalist rhetoric of racial responsibility and eugenic health to defend his ideas of motherhood. Hence, the factors contributing to "the stagnation of the Magyar race," such as "birth prevention, abortion, and abortionists," were to be neutralized by preventive eugenic measures. Bársony's second method to guarantee the "recovery of the race" underlined precisely this point: "The new generation should be not only large, numerically speaking, but also primarily healthy. The health of the parents is the first condition for [the recovery of the race] to happen."⁹⁶ More generally, the reappraisal of the eugenic role of the mother resulted in a nuanced evaluation of the relationship between eugenics and maternity. There was hence a convergence of interest between the future of the nation and the protection of the mothers. In order to raise the racial quality of future generations, Bársony advised the Hungarian government to "begin by protecting women," for racial protection commenced with conception.⁹⁷ The priority of the existing political elite should hence be to use eugenic propaganda to create a sense of social responsibility toward future generations.⁹⁸

The eugenic preoccupation with the health of future generations, speculations about the declining birthrate, and the protection of mothers and infants were most powerfully expressed in the work of the physician and social scientist József Madzsar (1876–1940). Madzsar published extensively during the war and was actively involved in the public health work coordinated by the Stefánia Association.⁹⁹ Established in 1915 under the leadership of Count Albert Apponyi (1866–1933), but under Madzsar's scientific management, the association was directly involved with disease prevention and the protection of mothers. To make effective use of its personnel, the association also promoted vigorous sanitary discipline, as exemplified by the training for professional district nurses, which commenced in 1916. Madzsar described these institutional efforts in a programmatic study in which he outlined the main arguments in favor of natalist and protectionist policies geared toward the protection of mothers and infants.¹⁰⁰

Practical solutions, however, were urgently needed, and Madzsar provided some in a public lecture on "The Protection of Future Generations and the War" delivered at the Society for Social Sciences in 1915. Similar to many of his previous publications, this study was motivated by Madzsar's preoccupation with fertility rates, reproduction, and eugenics.¹⁰¹ Despite the existence of an attitude favorable to eugenics, Madzsar felt that the government had been too reluctant to engage in a systematic policy of public health and eugenics. The crucial issue here was "the question of future generations." The future of the national community was disheartening, Madzsar continued, and it was not only due to internal losses, but also the relative demographic potency of the neighboring nations, like Romania and Serbia. In a language resembling Méhely's, Madzsar sketched an apocalyptic vision of a society facing biological extinction: "If we look into the future, a threatening vision appears in front of us: if we will not be able to recover soon from the losses suffered, we might be defeated by those races and nations who were only spectators of this immense devastation."¹⁰²

Building on the statistical analyses of mortality and birthrates for 1914 and 1915 that illustrated how Hungary, and Budapest in particular, experienced an increase in infant mortality, Madzsar hoped to change perceptions of social hygiene and of those pathological factors that contributed to the health of a population. War, he continued, required intensive demographic and eugenic policies. “The qualitative side of the demographic policy,” which in times of peace prevented “those burdened with genetic diseases, the mentally ill, and recurrent criminals [to] inundate the society with great masses of descendants,”¹⁰³ should be continued after the war. Agreeing with Hoffmann, Madzsar insisted that racial hygiene should govern the selection of those fit to reproduce, especially as Hungary had lost many of those “enthusiastic, courageous, and ready for sacrifice” and many with “healthy bodies” during the war. As a first measure, however, toward the recovery of the national body, Madzsar recommended a quantitative demographic policy “at least until the deficiency in numbers” was corrected.¹⁰⁴ The interplay between qualitative and quantitative eugenics was described by Madzsar as the most essential component of any future-oriented public health and social hygiene policy. This was not necessarily a project of national health to which everyone subscribed, but it was an influential, widely disseminated one. Two associations in particular worked extensively to ensure its implementation: the Hungarian Society for Racial Hygiene and Population Policy and the National Welfare Office for Disabled Servicemen. Once again, militant eugenics aimed to go beyond the limits of theory to produce a larger set of practical policies focusing on the health of the nation, social relations, and racial difference.

Eugenic Ideas Into Politics The Society for Racial Hygiene and Population Policy

During the war, eugenic propaganda introduced the political establishment and the general public alike to new ideas on health and hygiene, seen as requirements not only for the postwar regeneration of the national community, but also for ensuring that future generations benefited from the appropriate biological environment to prosper and grow. In addition to the Stefánia Association, one of the most active organizations working to counter the negative effects of war was the Hungarian Society for Racial Hygiene and Population Policy, established on 24 November 1917, with Count Pál Teleki (1879–1941) as president and Hoffmann as vice president.

According to Hoffmann, “The society strives primarily to spread and popularize proper race-hygienic knowledge among the general public, and to awaken the interest of younger audiences in racial hygienic work.”¹⁰⁵ To that end, providing Hungarian libraries with the classics of German eugenic literature, such as Wilhelm Schallmayer’s *Vererbung und Auslese*, Max von Gruber’s *Ursachen und Bekämpfung des Geburtenrückganges*, and Hermann Siemens’s *Biologische Grundlagen der Rassenhygiene und Bevölkerungspolitik*, was a key target, and a special request for the provision of books on heredity and eugenics was sent to German publishers.¹⁰⁶ Considering his close connections with a number of important German eugenicists, it comes as no surprise that Hoffmann attempted to model the Hungarian society on the German Society for Racial Hygiene, a strategy some Hungarian eugenicists opposed. Apáthy, for instance, complained about Hoffmann’s neglect of Hungarian contributions to eugenics (including his 1912 book on *The Laws of Evolution and Society*) and the gratuitous eulogizing of German literature on eugenics. Hoffmann rebutted Apáthy, arguing that he remained loyal to “the eugenic theory of Schallmayer-Gruber-Ploetz-Lenz-Siemens,” a line of reasoning that Apáthy severely criticized.¹⁰⁷

Such conceptual differences aside, it seemed that the society’s initial attempts to popularize eugenics among professionals and government civil servants were largely successful. Following the course on eugenics taught at the University of Budapest by prestigious

academics such as Mihály Lenhossék, Lajos Nékám, Sándor Gorka, and József Madzsar and benefiting from the support of the Royal Hungarian Ministry of War, the society aimed to organize a series of lectures on topics related to eugenics in other Hungarian cities. The intention was both educational and propagandistic. The courses were to deal with general issues, such as “the history and theory of racial hygiene, its biological and anthropological foundations, the declining birth rate, encouraging (positive) and finally impeding (negative) racial-hygiene.”¹⁰⁸ Civil servants were especially encouraged to attend these lectures. Caution was nevertheless required, as an uninformed public might misunderstand some of the topics; for instance, Hoffmann felt obliged to specify that negative eugenic practices, such as sterilization, “should be discussed for half an hour only.”¹⁰⁹

The society’s educational ambitions were also announced in various Hungarian journals¹¹⁰; but as Hoffmann appreciated only too well, eugenic propaganda needed to be complemented by a realistic strategy. Among the practical eugenic policies endorsed by the society, Hoffmann enumerated reform of the following: “the insurance system, the tax system, questions surrounding immigration and emigration, settlement policy, the one child system.”¹¹¹ It appeared that even the minister of trade and commerce, József Szerényi (1861–1941), was persuaded to sign a petition demanding the introduction of a “bachelor tax.”¹¹²

And yet by themselves, the dissemination of eugenic tracts and the attempts to enlighten officials on the negative effects of war, along with the introduction of eugenic legislation, were not going to solve the problem of racial degeneration alone—the population at large had to be persuaded to support these eugenic programs. To that end, public institutions, such as schools and societies, were targeted as vehicles of eugenic propaganda to foster family values and protect the racial qualities of the nation. “The war stole from us the blossom of our people,” Hoffmann lamented.¹¹³ Immediate measures to improve the health and social conditions of future generations were required, so that “none of your children or grandchildren,” Hoffmann warned his readers, “should curse your memory.”¹¹⁴

Hoffmann’s responsibility as vice president of the society was to provide a theoretical framework for racial hygiene and population policy, a task that Hoffmann undertook with his characteristic determination. Hence, in 1917, he prepared two memorandums on behalf of the society: one concentrating on “emigration, immigration, and re-colonization from the point of view of racial hygiene”; the other dealing with “internal colonization from the point of view of racial hygiene.”¹¹⁵ It is the latter document that dealt directly with the effects of war on Hungarian society.

War, Hoffmann argued, inflicted enormous racial damage on Hungary, with many strong and healthy members of the community lost in battle. Most importantly, these deaths were bound to have a significant impact on future generations; and “for the future of the race, this was the most painful loss.”¹¹⁶ The society’s proposed solution to correct this deficiency was “internal colonization.” For Hoffmann, “The goal of colonization, from the point of view of the future of the race, was that colonists should have many children with commendable qualities.”¹¹⁷ Not only was the one-child system criticized as deleterious to the future of the race, but families were also deemed unhealthy and degenerated.

In terms of population policy, Hoffmann’s intention was to recolonize Hungarian territory with racially healthy individuals.¹¹⁸ He therefore carefully examined prospective colonists against clearly defined, desirable characteristics, demanding that the individual and his or her family be, first and foremost, healthy and loyal to the Hungarian race. Those with criminal records were excluded, as were those with hereditary diseases. Childless couples married for more than four years were also discouraged from applying. Preference was

given to soldiers who distinguished themselves in war, widows, orphans, and young married couples determined to have children. Considering the pressing concern with the racial qualities of soldiers and veterans, material incentives were devised to encourage them to found families and reproduce. Taxes, for instance, would be gradually reduced in proportion to the number of healthy children they produced. Moreover, and in a move to combat the one-child system, a family's fertility not only assured the sustainability of their contract with the state, but also that the land could be bequeathed to the children.¹¹⁹

As seen from this memorandum, war offered eugenicists preoccupied with assessing the "racial damage" it caused a new framework within which to experiment with their ideas. Within this framework, eugenic concern with the racial qualities of the Hungarian nation dovetailed with the emerging racism and anti-Semitism of various Hungarian nationalists. In 1916, for instance, a military doctor András Csilléry (1883–1964)—future chair of the Hungarian National Association of Physicians (*Magyar Orvosok Nemzeti Egyesülete*)—established the Hungarian Association (*Magyar Társaság*), whose goal was to maintain "Hungarian supremacy over the extremes of Jewry," whereas the notorious Association of Awakening Magyars (*Ébredő Magyarok Egyesülete*) was formed in 1917 by Hungarian veterans.¹²⁰ Consciously or not, the demographic anxieties about the future of the Hungarian race expressed by Hoffmann and other eugenicists reflected the anti-Jewish, Christian patriotism touted by racial nationalists. Soaring military casualties, increased social instability, and the decline of fertility rates after 1915 were sufficient to bring together these diverse political groups.¹²¹

Collaborative work was, however, essential. Although anti-Semitic voices favored a Christian hygienic and demographic policy, the Society for Racial Hygiene and Population Policy encouraged a broad partnership and enlisted the help of the Stefánia Association, the League for the Protection of Children, and the National Welfare Office for Disabled Servicemen. These associations shared the same membership, including prominent politicians like Albert Apponyi and Pál Teleki. Politically, however, they were not committed to one ideology in particular. What united them was a similar preoccupation with hygiene, health, and eugenics.

The National Welfare Office for Disabled Servicemen

In 1917, the Hungarian government created the National Welfare Office for Disabled Servicemen with Teleki as its president.¹²² During the war, Teleki devoted considerable attention to eugenics and demography, both in his parliamentary capacity and in his activities for numerous committees.¹²³ Teleki integrated his program of national health within an overall framework of medical improvements in the military forces; furthermore, he saw in eugenics and population policy a means of achieving this end.¹²⁴ Under Teleki's direction, both the Society for Racial Hygiene and the national welfare office took measures to educate the military bureaucracy in health matters, commissioning informative leaflets and organizing public lectures. They also devised schemes to form sanitary units and mobile dispensaries.

Similar to those of the Hungarian Society for Racial Hygiene and Population Policy, the activities of the national welfare office sought to counteract the negative effects of war on Hungarian society.¹²⁵ The protection of the race from the points of view of racial hygiene and population were, however, deemed insufficient. In a language reminiscent of Méhely's, Teleki criticized urbanization and industrialization for producing negative fertility trends and for contributing to the nation's racial degeneration.¹²⁶ Soldiers returning home in particular were "warned of urban life" and of "the disadvantages of urban life (economic plight, the lack of housing, common unemployment, the loosening of family ties, and so

on).¹²⁷ Teleki also considered modern cultural trends, such as urban intellectualism, to be equally detrimental: “The existing intellectual proletariat proves the reproduction of this social class to be dangerous. From a population policy point of view this trend is particularly troublesome.”¹²⁸

An equally significant theoretical feature of the office was the unfailing hereditarianism that characterized its ideology and informed its activities. If acquired characteristics were inherited, then the physical damage caused by war was unavoidably transmitted to future generations. Hoffmann, for instance, responded angrily to this Lamarckian claim, declaring that “the sporadically encountered, and erroneous, view that the physical mutilation endured by veterans negatively influences the quality of their offspring must be invalidated; an acquired characteristic, such as mutilation, is not hereditary.”¹²⁹ Hoffmann’s decisiveness also related to his conviction that any postwar program of national health should not marginalize those disabled by military action; on the contrary, as long as their biological capital was deemed worthy, these individuals were to be reclaimed by the nation. Heredity and nationalism hence had to be reconciled. Hoffmann and Teleki accurately sensed that this fusion was necessary for the success of eugenics in Hungary, and they were not alone in welcoming it. The complex relationship among social hygiene, eugenics, and population policy not only preoccupied the eugenicists. They also evinced a higher degree of public receptivity toward the idea that the problems of society could be remedied through adequate racial hygienic policies than initially expected. This is aptly illustrated by the national conference on health and hygiene convened in Budapest between 25 and 28 October 1917.

The National Conference on Health and Hygiene

The conference on national hygiene was attended by the most important Hungarian sociologists, demographers, social hygienists, and eugenicists of their time.¹³⁰ Panels were devoted to numerous topics, ranging from national politics (including among others the protection of mothers and infants, the reform of public health and administration, and urban and rural hygiene); practical matters such as hospitals, housing, and insurances; and medical conditions such as tuberculosis and the spread of venereal diseases.

The section on “national politics from an economic point of view,” for instance, was chaired by Kálmán Müller (1849–1926), the president of the National Society for Public Health, whereas the politician and minister of commerce József Sztterényi was the main speaker. One of the important issues discussed by Sztterényi was the “bachelor tax,” a concept embodying traditional concerns over reproduction and one that proposed a rationalization of both personal and family life. The theses put forward by Sztterényi, therefore, stressed the necessity of large families as a prerequisite for the nation to reach its biological potential. Although the audience’s reception of these views was largely positive, some participants warned of the dangers implied by an excessive insistence on quantitative demography. Hoffmann, for example, was not impressed. Although encouraging a quantitative demographic policy, Hoffmann warned against a disproportionate population growth. Notably, he remarked that if these economic policies were to discount or neglect the importance of the “quality of reproduction,” they could “motivate lower layers of the population to reproduce.”¹³¹ Therefore, Hoffmann insisted, hereditary quality was as important as demographic quantity.

For its part, the panel debating “national politics from a racial point of view” was chaired by Pál Teleki and featured József Madzsar as the main lecturer. Introducing Madzsar, Teleki used the opportunity to express his own opinion on racial hygiene and eugenics. Importantly, Teleki sought to dispel the concerns expressed during the conference that the methods of racial hygiene advocated by eugenicists “seem cruel, and are indeed cruel

against individuals.” His support for these measures posited an overlap of interests among individuals, the state, and society, interests that, Teleki expected, should be at the center of any campaign of national eugenics. “These measures and endeavors,” Teleki commented, “are based on real social ideas and are necessary if we wish to establish a healthy and strong race, and raise a healthy and strong generation. I believe that we very much need to familiarize ourselves with these ideals and carry out these [eugenic] measures when the war is over.”¹³² Teleki celebrated the institutional and theoretical versions of eugenics fostered by the Eugenics Society in Britain and the Society for Racial Hygiene in Germany, as these societies could serve as models for the Hungarians “to promote these policies and infuse the public opinion with the need to bring up a healthy race and a healthy generation.”¹³³

Another topic of interest here concerned the protection of mothers and infants. Albert Apponyi chaired a discussion with the gynecologist Vilmos Tauffer (1851–1934), presenting an evaluation of the activities of the Stefánia Association and various policies of medical education implemented throughout Hungary. In his introduction, Apponyi concurred with the eugenicists that the “protection of mothers and infants” is “one of the most important branches of public health and social policy.”¹³⁴ He further noted: “The war and the terrible losses suffered by the nation placed increased pressure on the Hungarian political establishment to elaborate a new demographic policy.”¹³⁵ Accepting that the “one-child” system had caused “a decline in vigor and numbers of the best of the Magyar race,” Apponyi encouraged the introduction of “measures such as tax cuts and other benefits provided to large families and increased taxes levied on those who refrain from having a family.”¹³⁶ What is more, Apponyi asserted that any such policy had to be grounded in public support. It was critically important to inform and shape “the moral judgment of the nation, because no economic policy and public health policy can be carried out without a healthy moral judgment.”¹³⁷ Ultimately, this congress on public health and hygiene had been organized to develop and advance “direct measures in the field of public health,” in order to offer women the most propitious conditions to give birth “to healthy descendants” and protect their own physical condition. Therefore, Apponyi concluded, the protection of infants is inseparable from the protection of mothers: “The two concepts are closely connected and in no way may one of them be considered without the other.”¹³⁸

The scope and depth of this conference’s debates on hygiene and eugenics illustrate the prominence and relevance these topics had acquired in Hungary toward the end of the war. It also demonstrated that a more efficient promotion of eugenics was necessary to persuade the political establishment of the need to legislate the recommendations advanced by eugenicists. Parliament was at the center of political life in Hungary, and it was there that supporters of eugenics hoped to convince political parties of the importance of social and racial hygiene policies.

Practical Measures of Racial Hygiene and Population Policy

One such attempt came in 1916, when Albert Apponyi had raised the issue of the protection of mothers in the chamber of deputies.¹³⁹ As president of the Stefánia Association and one of the most respected Hungarian politicians of the time, Apponyi was a passionate advocate of measures to increase the number of racially healthy Hungarian families. With the birthrate declining, Apponyi believed that “the question of demographic policy, which is of paramount importance following the terrible loss of blood we have suffered during the war, has now gained even more importance than before.”¹⁴⁰ The Minister of the Interior János Sándor (1860–1922), in turn, guaranteed members of the house of commons and the general public alike that the government understood “the importance of this matter.” His assurances acquired a new significance considering the national war effort. “Hungary,” he agreed, “needs a new generation brought up in good health, one able to sustain this country for

another millennium.”¹⁴¹ Although neither Apponyi nor Sándor made direct references to racial hygiene, their preoccupation with the quality of the population and the protection of the future generations resonated with the eugenic movement.

The direct relationship between eugenics and war was eventually raised in parliament by Teleki on 2 March 1917.¹⁴² In a revealing speech, Teleki announced that assisting public health and population control was of immediate importance. Moreover, he claimed that there was no official policy on a number of critical issues such as declining birthrates, the social reintegration of wounded soldiers, or the repatriation of those refused immigration status in the United States. These issues directly affected the nation, but—Teleki complained—they were incorporated into the social policies pursued by the government without guidance from eugenicists and without sufficient material resources.¹⁴³ Military conflict imposed a new set of priorities on eugenicists, Teleki continued. Whereas before the war the concern with racial hygiene had been largely theoretical, the war had made practical eugenic policies supervised by the state paramount. Another issue addressed by Teleki concerned the repatriation of those Hungarians refused entry in the country by the American immigration offices. According to Teleki, their “re-immigration” to Hungary must be “eugenically and hygienically controlled.”¹⁴⁴ It was particularly important that the ministry of war be given information on the subsequent progress of these individuals, so that the effectiveness of various repatriation schemes and eugenic proposals could be properly evaluated.

Teleki warned his colleagues that determination alone would not suffice. Disparate activism by a number of individuals and public associations needed to be channeled toward accomplishing common objectives. Teleki suggested the creation of a national center for population policy, whose purpose would be to “influence the public opinion, the scientific community, the legislative bodies, and the government.” The prospective center would be divided into “numerous departments,” but one in particular was singled out: “a legislative committee” dealing with eugenics. This initiative clearly embodied “the request for collaboration with the government” and the intention to realize this collaboration by establishing a “parliamentary commission.” Teleki considered the latter idea to be the “most necessary, since the most important institution of population policy, the first and biggest center of social welfare in this country should be this parliament.”¹⁴⁵

Teleki concluded his parliamentary speech on a solemn note. Even though he sought to avoid direct references to the war’s potential outcome, he made it clear that Hungary would be one of the most affected among the belligerent powers. Accordingly, Teleki’s appeal constituted both a lucid diagnosis and a warning: “I remind you and ask all members of parliament—especially those who are members of the government—not only to begin this social-political work, but to go through with it, because we have to do so before the end of the war; otherwise demobilization will have catastrophic consequences.”¹⁴⁶ There was no doubt that Hungary’s demographic structure was about to change dramatically, whether as a result of the difficulties resulting from promiscuous sexuality, wartime marriages, arrival of refugees, the social and national reintegration of soldiers and invalids after the war, or to inadvertent mistakes of existing social policies.

Assessments similar to Teleki’s opened up a political space for health reformers and eugenicists to demand the introduction of eugenic policies as part of a larger program on national health. The Society for Racial Hygiene and Population Policy and the National Welfare Office for Disabled Servicemen served exactly this purpose, and Hoffmann proudly recalled later that “Hungary was the first country on the European continent to have accepted eugenics as a government measure.”¹⁴⁷ Aside from the “distribution of land to the mutilated in such a way that the best men in the hereditary sense of the word received land enough to support a family,” the government encouraged returning soldiers “of good stock”

to settle in the countryside, advising them on “the duty to rear many children” and dispelling concerns that physical mutilation incurred on the battlefield was “hereditary.”¹⁴⁸ These practical measures may have been related to settlement and population policies, but they were also relevant to the general dissemination of eugenic ideas among the population. As Hoffmann later recalled, “All local authorities and the different government offices were asked to assist these efforts of race rejuvenation, to spread sound eugenic ideas among the population, and to act accordingly when fulfilling their official duties.”¹⁴⁹

This energetic engagement with eugenics toward the end of the war was soon to be overshadowed by more pressing national concerns amidst the political turmoil following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy in 1918. These political developments greatly influenced the development of eugenics as well. If the outbreak of the war in 1914 had encouraged Hungarian eugenicists to work collectively toward the implementation of social and health policies, by the end of the war, in 1918, they had alienated each other along ideological lines. The increased political polarization engulfing the country, personal political preferences, whether socialist or conservative, ultimately ruined the potential for any collaboration across divergent ideological camps.¹⁵⁰ Neither the Society for Racial Hygiene and Population Policy nor the National Welfare Office for Disabled Servicemen survived the revolutions and counterrevolutions of 1918 and 1919.

Conclusions

In 1914, few eugenicists in Hungary believed that the Central Powers would lose the war. In fact, during the first two years of the conflict, there were some, like Méhely, who considered war a biological necessity. This view did not go unchallenged, especially after 1916. Increasingly, eugenicists like Apáthy, Madzsar, Bársony, and Hoffmann argued that the biological and social destruction inflicted by war was far more damaging to Hungary than the positive national fervor it also generated. Hungary’s finest individuals would be lost during the war, they maintained, in addition to a long inventory of social and economic problems. When, on 18 October 1918, the Hungarian Prime Minister István Tisza (1861-1918) declared “we lost the war,” the political and national storm to come extended far beyond mere military defeat. The eugenic theories about the impact of war on Hungarian society hence proved to be more than mere speculations by a handful of individuals preoccupied with the racial qualities of the nation. Adding to the human loss and a profound disruption of family life, there was a chronic economic crisis and, more threateningly for the state—as it turned out—the disruptive nationalist activism of the ethnic minorities. Indeed, more disastrous events were soon to unfold, including the inconceivable: the dissolution of historical Hungary.

The war’s end signified not only the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but also the end of a political arrangement in Central Europe in which the Hungarians had occupied a central place. In 1919, writing under a pseudonym, Teleki published an appeal for support from the international eugenic community in *The Eugenics Review*. In the name of the Hungarian Society for Racial Hygiene and Population Policy, Teleki protested “against the intended partition of Hungary, not in the interest of the Magyar or any other race, but for the progress of the entire human race.”¹⁵¹ Explaining that territorial losses would lead to the domination of Hungary’s “upper social classes” by other nations and states, Teleki concluded by asking “the president of the Eugenics Education Society to take action as far as he is able and willing to do, in order that competent men and the public in England consider the special situation of Hungary and do not demand a solution of the nationality question which destroys the best families of the nation.”¹⁵² To Teleki’s regret, however, neither the Eugenics Education Society nor any other eugenic organization in Europe could influence

the course of events in Hungary; those events culminated in the signing of the Treaty of Trianon in 1920.

After World War I, Hungary faced a series of destabilizing moments, from Communism in 1919 to the establishment of the conservative regime during the 1920s. The politically unstable first years after the war deprived the eugenics movement of much of its vitality; yet eugenicists anticipated better times ahead, as the powerfully evocative commentary provided by a terminally ill Hoffmann in 1921 demonstrates: “the whole country needs ‘race regeneration,’ not so much in the sense of eugenics, but sound morals, order and law, healthy family life, and regard for future generations. Everybody’s whole time and energy is devoted to the reorganization of the country and to avert the consequences of a so-called peace. Later, when conditions change, the time will come to continue the work of eugenics.”¹⁵³ Subsequent historical developments during the interwar period, most notably territorial disintegration, loss of population, political revisionism, racial legislation, and anti-Semitism, proved, however, that Hoffmann’s call for “race regeneration” was more than mere eugenic rhetoric; by 1940, it absorbed the energy of the entire country.

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Biography

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18. *Ibid.*, 233.
19. *Ibid.*, 333.
20. *Ibid.*, 234.
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24. *Ibid*.
25. *Ibid*.

26. Ibid., 12 (emphasis in the original).
27. Ibid., 19.
28. Ibid., 15 (emphasis in the original).
29. Ibid., 19.
30. Ibid., 24.
31. Ibid.
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108. Hoffmann. Rassenhygiene in Ungarn. p. 59
109. Ibid.
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112. Hoffmann. Rassenhygiene in Ungarn. p. 59
113. Ibid., 63.
114. Ibid., 64.
115. "A Magyar Fajegészségtani és Népesedéspolitikai Társaság. A kivándorlás, bevándorlás és visszavándorlás szabályozása fajegészségügyi szempontból"; and "A belső telepítés alapelvei fajegészségügyi szempontból." Magyar Társadalomtudomány Egyesület, István Apáthy iratai, Fond 2454, vol. 2, files 10-18/1918. Országos Széchényi Könyvtár Kéirattára. See also: A kivándorlás, bevándorlás és visszavándorlás szabályozása fajegészségügyi szempontból. *A Cél*. 1918; 9(9):562-66.
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131. Géza Hoffmann, A népegészségi országos nagygyűlés munkálatai, 72.
132. Pál Teleki, A népegészségi országos nagygyűlés munkálatai, 86.
133. Ibid. Some participants, like the physician Ernő Tomor, were critical of the excessive imitation of German racial hygiene. See: Tomor, Ernő. A népegészségi országos nagygyűlés munkálatai. p. 95-99.
134. Apponyi, A népegészségi országos nagygyűlés munkálatai, 103.
135. Ibid.
136. Ibid., 104.
137. Ibid.
138. Ibid.
139. Apponyi, Albert. Az anya- és csecsemővédelem a képviselőházban. Budapest: 1916.
140. Ibid., 4.
141. Ibid., 30.
142. The speech was first included in: Papp, Antál, editor. Gróf Teleki Pál. Országgyűlési beszédei. Vol. 1. Budapest: 1941. p. 7-24. 1917-1938 It was later republished as: Ablonczy, Balázs. Teleki Pál. Válogatott politikai írások és beszédek. Budapest: 2000. Szociálpolitika és fajegészségügy; p. 27-48. Hereafter reference will be made to this edition.
143. Teleki. Szociálpolitika és fajegészségügyi. p. 28
144. Ibid., 44-45.
145. Ibid., 47.
146. Ibid.
147. von Hoffmann, Géza. Eugenics in the Central Empires since 1914. Social Hygiene. 1921; 7(3): 291.
148. Ibid., 292.
149. Ibid.
150. For the context, see: Pastor, Peter, editor. Revolutions and Interventions in Hungary and its Neighbor States, 1918–1919. Boulder, CO: 1988. For a discussion of Madzsar during the Communist regime of Béla Kun, see: Kovács, Maria M. Liberal Professions and Illiberal Politics. Hungary from Habsburgs to the Holocaust. Washington, DC: 1994. p. 38-43.
151. Correspondence. The Eugenics Review. 1919; 10(4):223. [PubMed: 21259682]
152. Ibid.
153. Hoffmann. Eugenics in the Central Empires since 1914. p. 294