

Pázmány Péter Catholic University
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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION (PHD) THESES

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**The tripartite world order: United States' foreign policy and the issue of isolationism in
the 1920s**

PPKE BTK Történettudományi Doktori Iskola (Vezető: Prof. Dr. Óze Sándor)
**Gazdaság-, régió- és politikatörténeti Műhely (Vezető: Dr. habil. Medgyesy Schmikli
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Part I.

Subject of inquiry

The current dissertation examines the main elements of the foreign policy of the period of Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge's presidency. The subject of this research is connected to the post-world war decade. We will however not present a comprehensive picture of international politics in these years. We aim to examine a smaller, but decisive segment of the 1920's: the effect of the United States on world politics. A new international system was forming to take the place of the centuries-old Europe-centric order. The US-led American continent played for the first time a significant role, and with the rise of Japan, China's „revolutionary” change, and the naval arms race made the Far East an important playing field. The pillars of the new international system became based on three continents: Europe, America and East Asia.

The dissertation is comprised of two parts:

- **The introduction will present the relevant historical antecedents relevant to the topic.** The first chapter presents the birth and evolution of the United States. The chapter will discuss political, historical aspects and decision makers to help understand how the US was led to play an international role by the 1920s. Chapter two presents the history of ideas and religious elements that influenced American foreign policy thinking in the First World War and the years after, such as the messianic idea in Protestantism, which intertwined with isolationism and internationalism in the 1920s in a unique way.
- **The second part of the dissertation presents the Great War era, the new international role began by Woodrow Wilson and the responses to that by Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge.** The main topic of research will be discussed in detail here: How did the US join the international system and what ideas did help it to shape this system in it's image. Three regions will be highlighted here, namely Europe, Latin America and the Far East. The temporal scope of research encompasses nearly a decade, from the end of the Wilson administration (1921) to the end of Calvin Coolidge's term (1929).

History of research

The topic of this dissertation is discussed briefly in domestic and international academics. The post-war US is discussed usually in domestic terms due to the isolationist sentiment that characterized the 1920s. Both Hungarian and English sources only briefly discuss our topic. Nevertheless the literature published in Hungary represents a good tool as summaries. Works from Henry Kissinger, Paul Johnson, Paul Kennedy on the topic are fundamental in our research and draws on them especially in regards to antecedents. Although these works cannot be ignored, novel scientific findings make necessary to re-interpret them. Our thesis will dispute and clarify these points where required.

The dissertation had to reflect to the advances in academic sciences, as we have began the research in 2014, while the work started in 2017. Looking back from 2022 we can safely say that the centenarium of the First World War spurred on the discourse in academia both in Hungary and abroad, and we have been following these discussions. To understand the post-war era we made note of the new results of acedemia. To name a few, we have regarded the new findings of Mária Schmidt, Tamás Magyarics, Tibor Glant and Zoltán Peterecz.

In international publications not yet made available in Hungarian we have found similar developments. Many young authors have turned to this decade, but they rarely discuss this topic. Collin Dueck or Charles Kupchan present internationalism and isolationism comprehensively but use the historical antecedents to explain contemporary political events.

Identifying the problem

Historical memory views the post-world war decade focusing on US isolationism to return only on the stage in World War Two. Until the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt, the 30s were characterized by isolationist politics. We disagree with this view. Although popular American opinion did have an isolationist tone, this did not mean that the US was absent in international politics. With the active American participation in the First World War and the post war peace conferences, the US could not turn away from international politics. The United States' ascendancy to a world power was not only the result of the Second World War, the events of World War One also played a key role. Washington at the time was not only present on the American continent, but concerned itself with issues in Europe, the Far East and the Pacific. This resulted in a unique foreign policy in the era, where US policy makers despite the isolationist domestic mood endeavoured the most ambitious policy yet in US history: to create

an international world where the US would form the regions of Europe, the Americas, the Far East and the Pacific based on its own interests.

Aims

1. Debunking the myth of isolationism. Isolationism is a strand of American history of ideas which was present in American political life and popular mood, but foreign policy was not determined by it, rather the United States' century long goals.

2. The foreign policy effect of the US's parallel development. American enforcement of interests in Europe, Latin America, the Far East and the Pacific region developed in parallel and independent of each other, however they form parts of a larger picture. The creation of an international world with the leading power being the United States and thereby „americanizing” the world.

3. The comprehensive presentation of US foreign policy in the post-war decade. The novelty of this dissertation rests in the aim to answer one of the confusing questions of American historiography with regards to the historical antecedents and consequences. According to our thesis this decade is especially important as it is a connecting link not only of old and modern America, but the old and modern civilizational mission of the United States. As shown in the introduction, the North American nation since its inception prepared for its messianic role that it still aims to fulfill: a leading role in the international system and the americanization of world politics. To understand this is also the aim of this dissertation: the connection between post war American foreign policy role and the ideas behind it, a historical analysis of these processes.

The three main theses of this dissertation are as follows:

- 1. Isolationism is an idea and process that though influenced American foreign policy thinking, did not solely form it.**
- 2. The United States' foreign policy roles developed in parallel to each other with loose interconnections.**
- 3. Foreign policy in the 1920s was a continuation of previous processes, however also presented new, forward looking answers.**

Part II.

Methodology

This dissertation does not aim to present a strand of American history from beginning to our days, but rather to paint a comprehensive picture of an era's foreign policy that can be viewed on its own and can be used as a basis for future research. We decided to include in the literature not only English works, but international publications available in Hungarian translation. Without mentioning all sources we have reviewed in the case of Europe German, Italian, French, Polish, Bulgarian and Hungarian, in the case of Latin America various Ibero-American, in the case of the Far East Chinese and Japanese authors' works.

Aside from the literature we have emphasized the presentation of primary sources. In the project titled *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS) the complete digitalized annual reports of US foreign representations are available and served our research with thousands of pages of documents. We have used foreign policy papers as well as Hungarian and English language source publications. Apart from Washington legislation publications we used the published private letters, journals and notes of contemporary politicians and influential figures. Where relevant we used works from other disciplines, such as contemporary literature, philosophy, cartographical works, lexicons, chronologies, literary historical works, and geopolitical summaries to name a few.

The literature, academic papers and auxiliary disciplines were utilized in the introductory part of the dissertation, but also included them, where relevant and necessary in the second part as well. The main basis of the second part is nevertheless the primary sources of US foreign policy and legislative documents from the discussed decade. Both parts are characterized by reflections on them by quotes, works by contemporary persons.

Part III.

Novel results

Questions and answers

1. Isolationism is an idea and process that though influenced American foreign policy thinking, did not solely form it.

Isolationism and internationalism were American thoughts that since the birth of the United States had been present and continued across George Washington's farewell address through the Civil War and the Spanish-American War, but was still present in the debate on the League of Nations and during the Second World War. American historiography summarizes this idea in its function to defend the US from the negative influences of the world. Isolationism was a unique doctrine based on geopolitical traditions. The geographical location of the United States enabled it to avoid being drawn into the conflicts of European great powers. There have been other reasons for its inception apart from geography.

The self-isolation can be summarized in six points: 1. Using nature's safety shield to their advantage. 2. Historian Lawrence Kaplan summarized this aspect of isolationist thought in the following: „*The Calvinist utopia of New Jerusalem had been confirmed in the secular ideas of the Enlightenment*”. Based on the ideas of early Enlightenment and religious concepts, the US viewed by isolationism as a realized utopia, that could bring about the perfect and rational state, a sort of paradise on Earth. 3. Advancing freedom and prosperity at home. 4. Preservation of freedom of action abroad. 5. Defending the social homogeneity of the United States. 6. The sixth element of isolationism is pacifism. These six factors form the base of this school of thought, reinforcing each other. The opinion that isolationism can be associated to a certain political party and social group is no more than a historical myth. In US history isolationism has been a non-partisan factor that was an organic part of American foreign policy thought, and has influenced social movements and virtually all facets of politics.

2. The United States' foreign policy roles developed in parallel to each other with loose interconnections.

It has put US foreign policy on new grounds. The comparative analysis of historical events and diplomatic documents show that trade, customs, friendship and partnership treaties overlap for Europe and Latin America, signalling that US foreign policy inserted European and

Latin American affairs at the same time. This begs the question where did the US first implement its new ideas of an international order. Presidential notes mention Europe first and, Latin America is only mentioned after 1924. Between 1921 and 1924, there are fewer diplomatic documents pertaining to Europe, while Latin American affairs have been emphasized even then. The president's thoughts shared with Congress should be taken with a grain of salt, as it is in part accounting towards the legislature. Between 1921 and 1924, American diplomacy worked tirelessly to reinterpret its connection to other nations in the world.

In line with this process was the American activity in the Far East and the Pacific. Washington, after the naval fleet race post-world war has showed great activity in trade and diplomacy. The trifurcate foreign policy thought was based on a shared tradition, but was not unitary. This explains why in the 1920s foreign policy roles that may seem similar have different motives and values behind them.

3. Foreign policy in the 1920s was a continuation of previous processes, however also presented new, forward looking answers.

An important strategic element of post-war US foreign policy was the influencing of European affairs. American diplomacy had to reinterpret the 1812 Monroe doctrine but in certain aspects had to give it up. The Great War presented new challenges not only the West coast but the East coast as well which Washington had to address. Great Britain's power on the Atlantic has been shaken and the US had to consequentially guarantee its own coasts' safety. In this period American foreign policy relating to Europe was not isolationism, but partnership and building of stability. In Europe, the Harding and Coolidge administration meant diplomatic and trade expansion. They refused participation in the League of Nations, but maintained their relationships on the old continent, both with new and old nations. With the Washington Conference, the United Kingdom became their main partner in the Atlantic and European stage, Germany became the greatest beneficiary of reparations and loans, Italy became the beneficiary of American investments, while American diplomacy appeared in Central and Eastern Europe. Washington attempted to restore the economy and political stability of Europe through reparations and loans. By the end of the decade they had diplomatic relations with most nations and American investments and trade were at an all time high.

In the US's view Europe was one of the three pillars which needed to be in stable condition to enable the new, US-led international system. The Americans for the first time in their history had to closely follow the affairs of Europe to realize their civilizational destiny. The decision makers in Washington at the time viewed the issues in Europe as a matter of

reparations and loans and following the New England classical thought on trade, an aspect of economical and business solutions, and only secondarily as political. By 1928 these issues seemed solved, but apart from words did not have a guarantee that they would remain so. The political problems under the surface, e.g. the contradictions of the versailles-system, power vacuum in East and Central Europe, the issues of Germany and the Soviet Union, were known, but could hardly be adequately addressed, which later led to serious crises.

We do not state that the US vis-a-vis Europe was heading on a collision course, since excluding the Soviet Union it has cooperated for the first time with so many European nations. In the short term Franklin Roosevelt could assess the changing Europe with this spreading diplomatic machine. In the long term, the Harding and Coolidge presidencies paved the way for North Atlantic cooperations which could be expanded to Central and Eastern Europe because in American political thought the Europe no longer ended at the Rhein, but included Eastern Europe.

Washington had to reassess its relationship with Latin America. By the end of the decade the cooperation manifested within the framework of the Panamerican Movement rather than the Latin American League founded in Geneva. The frozen talks were reinitiated in 1923 while a year prior representatives of these nations consulted in Washington, and in Baltimore regarding women's rights issues. By the end of the decade, the 1928 sixth pan-american conference in Havana was not only a success in and of itself, but was the culmination of a process of regional cooperation between the US and Latin America. Five years later at the pan-american conference in Montevideo the already severe Great Depression did not shatter the nascent pan-american momentum, even though it dealt a severe blow to other US foreign policy aspirations in other regions. Franklin Roosevelt announced his Good Neighbor Policy in 1933 based on this new foreign policy of the 1920s.

The United States viewed the region not only as trade potential, but considered other economic factors as well. American investments towards countries south of the border began with focus on raw material extraction and almost exclusive influence on communication channels. Washington maintained tight control over several nations' economic, trade and financial sectors, even with the reduced numbers of US fleet and marine presence in the area, not shying away from openly supporting pro-American governments. Reduced military presence together with tighter economic control led to positive outcomes for Latin Americans. Local economies and financial life stabilized which in turn increased political stability. Thus with Washington at its lead, the US created a regional cooperation much more effective than

than the League of Nations on the Western hemisphere where local nations were treated as partners, with US judging.

All of the above processes highlighted that the US moved closer to achieving a well ordered and stable frontier. This however did not automatically solve all historical problems in the area. Border disputes, domestic political crises, revolutions and localized armed conflict still occurred. Although the influence of the League of Nations and other foreign powers was hindered, it could not be completely eliminated. There was still no agreement with Canada on the issue of the Great Lakes and shared rivers, while on the Arctic the presence of Denmark, Norway, and as a rising threat the Soviet Union was worrying. In South America, Germany's military connections became a challenge during World War Two. By the second decade of the century the influence of communist ideology had begun to sprout in Central and South America, becoming the roots of later issues in the Cold War. Even so, this foreign policy founded in the 1920s guaranteed a mostly stable hinterland for the US until the 1960s.

After the Great War, the US engaged in active diplomacy in the Far East as well. The North American nation after the pacification of the Philippines and some Pacific islands had reached the shores of East Asia. Here they encountered a centuries old cultural and historical rifts that had to be addressed by the government in Washington. Besides economic interests, the activity of American missionaries proved that the Far East would be at the center of US foreign policy for the next century.

During its history, the US competed with European powers, but for the first time it had to compete with other civilizations, such as China or Japan. In this situation was the Open Door Policy of John Hay developed followed by the second Open Door Policy. Hay's idea was similar to that of Monroe's for Latin America. The Far East, including China had to exist independently of the Great Powers to enable US influence and control. Hay highlighted that China and the Far East should not be handled together, as this could result in dangerous challenges. US foreign policy however did not heed Hay's warning and linked the Far East and the Pacific region. American admiralty evaluated the naval arms race in the region as a threat to the US West coast and deemed it necessary to extend the oceanic shield to the Pacific as well. The First World War and Paris peace conferences strengthened this conviction and this began a new arms race in the region

In this tug-of-war with the elimination of Germany, the US became third next to Great Britain and Japan. The Washington Conference provided a temporary solution to Far East tensions, however naval disarmament happened only on paper. Although some implementation happened for large warships, these did not impact previously initiated fleet programmes or new

technologies such as flight, motorization or the utilization of submarines. The Washington Conference was a success for American style diplomacy, but could not solve all problems, e.g. the division of China, the influence of the Soviet Union in the region or the Manchurian question. American diplomacy reached its main goals. It has prevented a British-Japanese alliance and instead proposed a „Great Three” cooperation . It left the gates of trade in China open and – on paper – guaranteed China’s territorial integrity. Japan also had to withdraw from the Santung Peninsula and the Russian Far East and give up – for now – on Manchuria. The US founded friendly bi- and multilateral relations with Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Japan.

With these goals achieved, the entire Pacific Ocean region was handed over to the admiralty. This in turn led to the cooling of relations with Japan, even though the fundamentals of cooperation had been previously created. Neither parties took steps to improve relations and the respective fleets continued to compete. Japanese and American naval leaders cited each other as security concern and this became embedded in geopolitical thinking on both sides. Foreign policy thinking in Washington at this time already attempted to adapt 19th century politics to the needs of the 20th century. Despite later events, the US conducted a foreign policy based on new grounds in the 1920s. American diplomacy proved, despite its shortcomings that it can independently provide answers to the crises of the „old diplomacy” of the Great Powers and present an alternative. They also aimed at long term goals with cooperation in Europe with Great Britain, with Japan on the Far East and Australia and New Zealand on the Pacific. The latter two did not become a reality due to historical events, but were resurrected after the end of the Cold War and are ongoing. Although American diplomacy noted the increasing influence of the Soviet Union and China in the region, but this was not emphasized at the time. In retrospect, this played a part in later Soviet-Chinese and American-Chinese relations. The challenges posed by an independent China appeared after the First World War and constitute the most relevant problem for contemporary international relations in our current time.

Part IV.

Relevant publications

NAGY GERGELY: *Woodrow Wilson's effect on the emergence of 'modern' American media.* In: *Öt Kontinens: Az Új- és Jelenkori Egyetemes Történeti Tanszék Tudományos Közleményei.* 2017/2. (2020). 107–122.

NAGY GERGELY: *A wilsoni korszak alkonya.* In: *Kommentár.* vol. 15. (2020) no. 4. 98–109.

NAGY GERGELY: *A latin-amerikai országok népszövetségi tagságának hatása az Egyesült Államok Latin-Amerika politikájára.* In: *Külügyi Műhely.* vol. 2. (2020) no. 1. 232–250.

NAGY GERGELY: *The United States' relations with the fascist Italy in the decade following the First World War.* In: *Öt Kontinens: Az Új- és Jelenkori Egyetemes Történeti Tanszék Tudományos Közleményei.* 2016/2. (2019). 145–158.

NAGY GERGELY: *Az Amerikai Egyesült Államok szerepe Magyarország első világháború utáni helyzetében.* In: Ambrus, László; Rakita, Eszter (szerk.) *Amerikai magyarok – magyar amerikaiak. Új irányok a közös történelem kutatásában.* EKE Líceum Kiadó, Eger, 2019. 51–74.

NAGY GERGELY: *Az első világháború „keresztes lovagja” – Wilson elnök és az amerikai elképzelés egy új világrendről.* In: Balogh, Gábor (szerk.): *Isten hozzád Európa.* Szent Vince Szakkollégium, Piliscsaba, 2014. 54–75.