Trianon Again and Again


Issues related to the so-called “Trianon complex”—preoccupation with the disintegration of historical Hungary, the peace treaty that sanctified it and the consequences thereof—represent the subject of public discourse in some form or another in both Hungary and its neighboring countries. Moreover, these issues not only engage the attention of historians, intellectuals and, occasionally, political officials, but filter into everyday discourse as well (albeit often under the influence of opinion makers). The events themselves—the collapse of the Austro–Hungarian Monarchy, the political reorganization of the territory of the former dualist state and the new foundations underpinning relations between Hungarians and their neighbors—have been examined rather comprehensively, therefore the authors of the volume under consideration chose rather to investigate how Hungarians and Slovaks have remembered and continue to remember the Treaty of Trianon.2 That is, how do we interpret the treaty, how do we experience it, how do we recall it and think about it, how do we construct it and, finally, how do we pass this complex phenomenon on to subsequent generations? How does an event build itself into our lives that affects many

1 http://www.forumhistoriae.sk/documents/10180/286159/trianon.pdf, accessed June 09, 2014. The reviewer must disclose that he served as one of the professional editors of the book and thus should not be expected to voice heavy criticism of it.

people only distantly or indirectly and, furthermore, continues to draw farther away from us year by year, thus making our knowledge of it increasingly derivative?

The Disintegration of Historical Hungary signifies the conclusion of a multi-year Slovak–Hungarian project. Much of the content of the book is based on presentations held at a conference organized by the editors in Nové Zámky (Érsekújvár), Slovakia with the support of the Slovak Academy of Sciences and the Hungarian–Slovak Historians’ Mixed Committee in 2010. Some of these presentations have already been published in Hungarian, although The Disintegration of Historical Hungary in its present form is the product of a long and thorough editorial process that has provided the Slovak reading public with a truly mature work. The composition of the authors in terms of nationality, age and academic discipline already provides an indication of the diversity of the book’s content: in addition to Slovaks, Hungarians and members of the Hungarian minority living in Slovakia, there is a French historian among the contributors, which include both the relatively young and well-known researchers as well as representatives from several subject areas—history, political science, sociology and didactics. Interdisciplinarity characterizes the entire volume; its contributors frequently show that they are not afraid to step out of their narrowly defined academic disciplines in order to utilize the methods and results of related fields of study. From the historian’s viewpoint, perhaps the most exciting aspect of the book is that it contains several approaches to the theme in question, varying from the “national” to the “analytical.” It is a tribute to the editors that this heterogeneity does not have a disturbing effect on the reader and does not pull the volume apart—the texts complement one another well and, in the end, present an organic unity. The final product cannot, however, be regarded as a monolithic whole, thereby more accurately reflecting reality in all its paradoxical aspects.

The decision of the editors to juxtapose presentations of popular Slovak and Hungarian attitudes toward Trianon is exemplary from several perspectives. For one, it directs attention to the issue of the degree to which we (do not) understand one another, showing how Slovaks, Romanians and citizens of other countries surrounding Hungary comprehend the “Trianon complex” of the Hungarians and how the latter perceive the grievances of their neighbors and how aware we all are of our own traumas. The overall impression emerging

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from the book is not exactly encouraging: it appears that people are preoccupied with their own problems and are not even aware of the problems of others (and often seem to not even care) (p.290, 302). This is, unfortunately, not too surprising, just as the obvious incompatibility of the two “national viewpoints” represents nothing out of the ordinary.

The two editors of the book, Miroslav Michela and László Vörös, belong to the young generation of historians from Slovakia that is actively conducting research of high academic quality regarding the common Hungarian–Slovak past, frequently in close cooperation with historians and social scientists from Hungary. Michela and Vörös are well suited for the job of editing the book not only because they are comfortable working with sources in both Slovak and Hungarian (and other languages as well), but because they maintain a proper distance from ethnocentric or explicitly nationalist schools of thought and are not afraid to enter into disagreement with the “mainstream” representatives of the traditional “national” approach to the issue of Trianon.

*The Disintegration of Historical Hungary* provides an answer to the frequently posed question: is there any reason at all to deal with Trianon? Does keeping the issue of Trianon on the agenda merely serve to intensify the trauma surrounding the treaty, to rub salt in unhealed wounds, often for concrete political purposes? Although the authors of the various chapters in the book express divergent opinions in this regard, in general they appear to believe that the scientific thematization of the issue of Trianon and “talking through” problems connected to the treaty could encourage more constructive dialogue between Hungarians and their neighbors and raise the level of self-awareness among all concerned, thus alleviating tension stemming from the injuries of Trianon. Contributors to the book emphasize the importance of approaching the issue of Trianon with the objective of understanding the opinion of others or presenting the cultured expression of one’s own viewpoint rather than placing the subject in its trauma-enhancing nationalist context. It is also important to continue dialogue surrounding Trianon as it pertains to relations between Hungarians and their neighbors because the majority nations of the states surrounding Hungary regard the Treaty of Trianon as a symbol of their self-determination and the foundation of their national statehood. Members of these nations widely consider Trianon to have been a “rightful decision” representing “historical justice” (p.285, 290) judgments that have solidified into a dogma of sorts within their

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4 Trianon was portrayed in this way in Czech and Slovak history textbooks as well. See Slávka Otčenášová,
national identities and thus immediately provoke charges of “Greater Hungarian nationalism” and “irredentism” if questioned in any regard. The intelligentsia of the majority nations in the countries neighboring Hungary has in this way used Trianon (particularly before 1989) as a means of legitimizing often heavily discriminatory minority policy, which may be a comfortable position, though is untenable from a professional standpoint. Seen from the latter perspective, the objective of conducting critical—and unbiased—analysis of the “Trianon status quo” is just as legitimate as the examination of previous conditions.

Not including the introduction and the concluding text, The Disintegration of Historical Hungary is composed of five parts, each with different chapters covering a distinct subject area: “Historical Perspectives” by László Vörös and Etienne Boisserie; “The Treaty of Trianon in Political Discourse” by Ignác Romsics, Štefan Šutaj, Attila Simon, Roman Holec and Peter Macho; “Education, Textbooks and Didactics of History” by György Jakab, Viliam Kratochvíl and Barnabás Vajda; “The Ritualisation of Public Remembering” by Miklós Zeidler, Balázs Ablonczy, József Demmel and Miroslav Michela; and “The End of the Kingdom of Hungary and the Treaty of Trianon as a Cultural Trauma” by Éva Kovács, Dagmar Kusá and Miroslav Michela.

The chapters of the book touch upon important themes that cannot be introduced within the scope of the present text. The reviewer will thus examine issues that arise primarily in the chapters by László Vörös and Éva Kovács, though surface to a greater and lesser degree elsewhere as well. Both Vörös and Kovács object to the use of the “language of trauma” in discourse surrounding Trianon as well as the “nationalization” of this discourse stemming from the national (or nationalist) perspective of the majority of participants. Although this observation is valid in several regards, it would nevertheless be worthwhile to first separate historiography from public discourse in order to analyze them separately.

If we take a look at Hungarian historiography, one sees that the most prominent Hungarian historians, including those who live outside Hungary, abandoned the national-ethnocentric (“nation-building”) approach decades ago (pp.38–41) (though serious academic and political debate continues to take place in this regard). The nationalist perspective exercises considerable force only on the Hungarian historiographical periphery, where it strengthens and weakens in waves; this perspective is, however, characteristic of mainstream Slovak

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historiography as well (p.50). The particularly important “nation-building” and legitimization function that historiography performs for the Slovak political and cultural élite, one which implicitly limits self-reflection, obviously plays a major role in this phenomenon. This applies as well to the “language of trauma,” which a considerable proportion of active Slovak historians utilize in connection to Slovak national grievances (dualism, the First Vienna Award, etc.) rather than to Trianon. The ethnocentric perspective and use of the “language of trauma” are strongly characteristic of both Hungarian and Slovak public discourse in a broadly defined sense. Therefore it would be necessary to use increasingly prudent and precise language in order to avoid the “traumatization” of discourse pertaining to Trianon, particularly, though not exclusively, among Hungarian participants. However, approaching the issue of Trianon from a national point of view is not in itself tantamount to the acceptance of the nationalistic-ethnocentric perspective; it merely indicates the use of a certain—in the present case “national”—interpretative framework. This framework has become increasingly relevant with the spread of the national idea (and nationalism) over the last century and a half and continues to hold up strong with a foundation of support in the form of the nation state. Viewing history through the “national prism” does not necessarily distort an understanding of past events, whereas such distortion is a natural product of the “nationalist-ethnocentric” approach and thus represents an inherent infringement upon professional standards. Debate regarding the use and validity of the “national” interpretive framework is naturally necessary, though it is important to keep in mind that the total omission of this structure can lead to the same dead end as its absolute, uncritical use. Instead of summarily rejecting this framework, it would perhaps be better to consider the degree to which the nationalist perspective influences the discourse in question while maintaining the expectations of consistency, precise and objective phraseology and avoidance of double standards.

If one accepts the legitimacy of the national interpretive framework, then the appraisal of Trianon as a “national catastrophe” is indeed valid from the Hungarian (national) viewpoint. This approach cannot be regarded as either “nationalist” or “traumatizing”: it merely expresses the fact that the Treaty of Trianon represented a heavy blow to the Hungarian national concept and the nationality-based Hungarian community (as well as the Hungarian national consciousness).\footnote{In more detail see Csaba Zahorán, “A trianoni labirintus. A Trianon-jelenség és okai a mai magyar}
state often occurred to the detriment of non-Hungarian nationalities and ethnicities until the end of 1918. Criticism, expressed most prominently by Éva Kovács, of the language of trauma and the national approach within discourse regarding Trianon seems to miss the target because it focuses on consequences of rather than causes. The issue of Trianon has remained active not as a result of the actual historical events that culminated in the conclusion of the treaty in 1920, but due to the disorder that continues to surround the situation of Hungarian minorities living in the countries surrounding Hungary. The “resentful” Hungarian discourse serving to “traumatize” discourse pertaining to Trianon to which some of the contributors voice objection can frequently be interpreted as a reaction to the national/nation-state mechanism that often serves to harm the interests of Hungarians living in these countries and not simply as the manifestation of a nostalgic or frustrated yearning for the former “Hungarian empire.” As long as Romania and Slovakia, just to mention the two countries with the largest Hungarian national-minority populations, continue to operate as (nation) states aiming to achieve the integration of minorities through assimilation (just as historical Hungary did before 1918), attempts to neutralize discourse surrounding Trianon from a national perspective will fail. These efforts can succeed only if minority policies in states neighboring Hungary also become neutral in national terms; that is, if the majority élites in these countries discontinue their efforts to “nationalize” their countries.

The Disintegration of Historical Hungary is also valuable because it presents the various trends within Hungarian and Slovak historiography, from the classical “national” (though not nationalist) narrative to the “analytical” orientation calling into question the national interpretive framework. Slovak readers will encounter in the book evidence of the diversity of the “Hungarian viewpoint,” which is often considered to be homogenous. Éva Kovács’s chapter rejecting the traumatization of Trianon from a rigorously academic perspective provides an excellent example of this diversity (though this viewpoint is naturally subject to


6 According to census data from the year 2011, there are nearly 460,000 Hungarians living in Slovakia and 1.24 million Hungarians living in Romania.

7 See László Vörös, “How to Define a ‘Nation?’ A Thing, a Group, or a Category?” in Overcoming the Old Borders: Beyond the Paradigm of Slovak National History, ed. Adam Hudek et al. (Bratislava: Institute of History, Slovak Academy of Sciences in Prodama, 2013), 11–23.
debate, as can be seen in the polemics regarding the treaty and its consequences that took place within the Hungarian periodical Élet és Irodalom a few years ago). The Disintegration of Historical Hungary also provides demonstration of the more subtle nuances within Slovak discourse regarding Trianon.

Although the editors and publisher of The Disintegration of Historical Hungary are from Slovakia, one can still consider the book to be a joint Hungarian–Slovak enterprise (especially if one takes the 2010 conference into account) that fits into the process of multi-faceted cooperation between Hungarian and Slovak historians and social scientists. One can only welcome the book’s message that it is worthwhile to extend research related to Trianon (and ethnicity in general) to other levels and domains, such as the history of everyday life (p.63). However, the focus of The Disintegration of Historical Hungary on the “analytical” approach directs attention to those methods that are capable of providing momentum and, in certain instances, totally new foundations for Hungarian–Slovak professional dialogue, which occasionally falters as a result of the exclusivity of national truths.

The Disintegration of Historical Hungary has only a few minor shortcomings. Some of the chapters contain redundancies, such as the examinations of the origins of the Slovak historical canon in the chapters by László Vörös and Dagmar Kusá and Miroslav Michela. The theoretical portion of the chapter by the latter authors, moreover, seems to be somewhat overstated. The chapter by György Jakab and Viliam Kratochvíl could have placed greater emphasis on Trianon itself, thereby providing practical assistance to those who teach the history of the treaty and its consequences. The chapter by Ignác Romsics is distinctly terse in light of the fact that he is one of the most highly recognized authorities on the issue of Trianon of Hungary; Slovak readers, especially, would have been


interested in a more detailed treatment of the theme from the noted Hungarian historian. Géza Boros’s article would have served as an appropriate supplement to Miklós Zeidler’s essay on the current situation with regard to Trianon memorials. Several recently published works have, additionally, contributed to the continuingly growing discourse surrounding Trianon: in connection to Hungarian–Slovak relations, it would be worth noting another work from Roman Holec examining recent developments in Hungarian historiography and public discourse in a critical, polemic tone (which elicited two published responses) or Slovak film director Dušan Trančík’s excellent documentary film Hodina dejepisu [History Lesson].

Perhaps it is not too naive to believe—or perhaps to hope—that The Disintegration of Historical Hungary will promote development in Slovak and Hungarian thought connected to Trianon, thus increasing awareness of the fact that the disintegration of historical Hungary did not resolve national-nationality problems in the Carpathian Basin, but simply moved them beyond the borders of Hungary. A (positive) solution to these problems has yet to arrive.

Translated by Sean Lambert

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