

The Trianon Syndrome in Today's Hungary

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No event in modern history affected Hungarians as much as the Treaty of Trianon (1920), which reduced the country to a fraction of its former self and cut the Magyar nation into five unequal parts. The impact of Trianon can only be compared to that of the Battle of Mohács (1526) and Hungary's subsequent trisection, which made the country into the battleground of two empires for two centuries, and also sowed the seeds of the nation's modern-day decline.

Hungary's dismemberment left a deep impact upon virtually every segment of the Hungarian nation, be these in the truncated country, in the detached territories, or in the immigrant communities abroad.¹ During the interwar years, they all suffered from what came to be known as the Trianon syndrome, and they all devoted most of their political efforts propagandizing against this unjust treaty and seeking support for the cause of Hungarian revisionism.

The nature and magnitude of the psychological shock upon the Hungarian mind was perhaps best expressed by Gyula Szekfű (1885-1955), the pre-eminent historian of the interwar years who, in his *Három nemzedék* [Three Generations], gave vent to his feelings as follows: "This book is my personal experience.... I felt... I would never be able to recover my strength and my will to work until having taken account of the decline that had lead us to this disaster. I simply had to face up to the forces that have dragged my nation out of a stream of healthy evolution. Thus did I come to write this book and... thus did I redeem my soul."²

Szekfű's views were echoed by all segments of Hungarian society: Politicians and poets, scientists and historians, bureaucrats and artisans, landless peasants and landed aristocrats, right-leaning gentry and left-leaning intellectuals, avant-garde artists and conservative military men. The Trianon shock embraced the whole nation, and it became a lasting national malady that has ravaged the minds and hearts of all Hungarians ever since that time, notwithstanding the fact that during the four decades of communist rule Trianon became a national taboo.³

That this was the case is best demonstrated by the rumblings in Hungarian intellectual circles since the early 1980s when, for the first time in many years, some dared to talk about Trianon and the psychological dislocations it has caused.⁴ This daring defiance, by the way, was the result of the growing concern for the welfare of the Hungarian minorities beyond the Trianon frontiers, who were being subjected to increasing pressures of denationalization. One of the best expressions of this concern was Péter Hanák's article in the *Élet és Irodalom* [Life and Literature], where he pointed out the fact that the Hungarians have never been able to digest Trianon: "The trauma of defeat was so terribly deep, and it shook the nation's life-foundations to such a degree that for years and even decades we could hardly expect anyone... to come up with its objective assessment.... Trianon prevented us from recognizing the relativity of our place and role in the world, and the necessity of establishing good relations with the Danubian peoples."⁵

Given the above, the early reaction to Trianon included the foundation of a whole set of anti-Trianon organizations, the initiation of an all-embracing revisionist movement, the enlistment of the country's historians and scholarly institutions to justify revisionism from a historical, economic and geographical point of view, and the search for alliances among such equally revisionist European great powers as Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany.

While this unified national effort in favour of a policy of revisionism did result in some ethnically-linguistically justifiable territorial revisions between 1938 and 1941, Hungary's unfortunate involvement in World War II on the Axis side undid all of those gains. Moreover, in light of the country's Soviet occupation and communist control between 1945 and 1990, the whole Trianon question was placed on ice. However keenly felt by all Hungarians, for at least three of the four decades of Soviet-communist rule, it was impossible to speak about the injustices of Trianon. Nor was it possible to raise the problem of the Hungarian minorities in the neighbouring states, without being accused of chauvinism.

The Re-Emergence of the Trianon Question

The situation changed gradually during the 1980s, when the Treaty of Trianon and its impact were beginning to be treated by serious historians;⁶ and then very suddenly after the fall of communism, when the floodgates of the freedom of expression were suddenly thrown wide open. The result was the appearance of a whole series of Trianon-related works. Many of these are of little scholarly value, but they gave vent to the frustration that had accumulated during the decades of enforced silence.

Naturally, there are many exceptions among these emotion-filled post-communist publications. Some of them are respectable and well-researched monographs, like those by József Galántai and Jenő Gergely of the University of

Budapest,⁷ while others are sections of comprehensive syntheses produced by post-communist Hungarian historiography. The two best examples of the latter were prepared as university textbooks. They include Zsuzsa L. Nagy's synthesis of interwar Hungarian history written for use at the Kossuth University of Debrecen,⁸ and the multi-authored history of twentieth-century Hungary prepared under the direction of Ferenc Pölöskei for the Eötvös University of Budapest.⁹ L. Nagy devotes about six of her 266 pages (pp. 88-94) to the discussion of Trianon and its consequences; while the Pölöskei-edited volume covers the same topic in five of its 267 comparable pages, i.e., in its coverage of Hungarian history up to the year 1945. Both of these are detached summaries of historic Hungary's mutilation, but both of them also point to the peacemakers' violation of the principle of national self-determination that brought about the country's dismemberment and then resulted in the creation of several small, almost equally multinational states around Hungary. The authors of these works also emphasize the psychological pain produced by Trianon for several generations of Hungarians, most of whom were unable to reconcile themselves to the new realities, and were searching fervently for ways to undo the effects of Trianon.

It should be pointed out in this connection that these historical syntheses, as well as virtually all other books dealing with modern Hungary's historical development, have reverted to the use of traditional Hungarian names for places and regions located in the detached territories. This custom, a standard practice in interwar Hungary, had been abandoned by Marxist historiography in the late 1940s and early 1950s — although without affecting significantly their use in everyday conversation. A return to the use of traditional place names had already begun during the 1980s. The full impact of this trend, however, could not be felt until after the fall of communism. This trend also produced a number of geographical dictionaries that supply the original Hungarian and/or German version of many thousands of place names that have been altered following the transfer of these territories from under Hungarian to Austrian (1920), Czechoslovak (1920), Polish (1920), Romanian (1920 and 1945), Soviet (1945), Yugoslav (1920 and 1945), Ukrainian (1991), or Slovak (1993) sovereignty.¹⁰ This, in turn, revived their use even among those members of the younger generations, who by virtue of their age had no direct links with the lost territories.

The Question of Frontier Revisions

Notwithstanding the mass of emotional outpourings that followed the collapse of communism, and in spite of the ever more difficult situation faced by the Hungarian minorities in Ceaușescu's and Iliescu's Romania, and in Mečiar's Slovakia, none of Hungary's post-communist governments came out in favour of frontier revisions. True, these governments did stress the need for improved human rights for the Hungarian minorities, but in emphasizing human rights the

Hungarian authorities marched hand in hand with the United States and all other major West European states. It seems therefore, that the various post-communist Hungarian governments were fully aware that Hungary's prospective membership in the NATO and in the European Economic Community [EEC] is predicated upon their acceptance of the status quo with respect to the frontiers.

This policy of keeping quiet about frontier revisions and stressing the need for improved human rights has also been followed by most of Hungary's important civic organizations, including the Hungarian World Federation, which, at times, has been accused of being too nationalistic. Yet when, on the occasion of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Treaty of Trianon, the Federation organized a three-day conference, it turned out to be a detached assessment of the situation, with papers being presented by a number of respected Hungarian and Western scholars.¹¹

Of the many recent publications concerning Trianon, the most talked-about is the one written by Ernő Raffay, a founding member of the Hungarian Democratic Forum [Magyar Demokrata Forum], who had also served as a member of the parliament (1989-94) and as the Vice-President of the National Defense Council (1990-93) during Hungary's first post-communist government. Entitled *Magyar tragédia* [Hungarian Tragedy],¹² this work combines elements of professional historical scholarship with a degree of emotionalism that appeals to the common reader. The author broaches the question of frontier revisions, but he recognizes that the possibilities for such revisions are very remote and unlikely in the foreseeable future.

In a later study prepared for a Hungarian-American audience, however, Raffay comes out clearly in favour of frontier revisions based on the principle of national self-determination. He does this in conjunction with his analysis of Hungarian party politics in the mid-1990s: "The border question is the fulcrum of today's politics: The political parties that subscribe to the changeability of Hungary's Trianon frontiers stand for Hungarian national interests. Those that do not subscribe to this view, on the other hand, do not represent national interests, and as such are not within the ranks of patriotic parties."¹³

The Growth of Pragmatism

Raffay's book elicited sufficient reaction for a special conference to be organized by the Hungarian World Federation on January 15, 1996.¹⁴ The conference was attended by a great number of intellectuals, thirty-two of whom made an effort to comment on Raffay's book and on the whole question of revisionism. Their ranks included scholars, writers, politicians, and various other public personalities, a number of them from the Western World. They all agreed that the Treaty of Trianon was an intensely unfair and unjust arrangement, that the Hungarian minorities in the neighbouring states are being subjected to various degrees of denationalization, and that the impact of Trianon was so thorough that it left a

permanent scar upon the Hungarian mind, but they could not agree on the question of revisionism. The majority of them, however, felt that it would be unwise to broach this question at this time, even though this frontier rectification would only be based on ethnic-linguistic considerations. They also agreed that they should concentrate on demanding improved human and collective rights for the Hungarians on the other side of the frontiers, and that frontier revisions would have to be left to a hoped-for better future. One of them, Gyula Borbándi, a noted scholar of the history of the Hungarians in the West, closed the argument with the well-known French proverb: "Jamais y parler, toujours y penser."¹⁵

One of the recent results of this reemerging Trianon syndrome is the establishment of a Trianon Association in 1997, whose goals included "the international reexamination of the peace-Diktats," aiding the preservation of the Magyar language and culture in the detached territories, and furthering the introduction of autonomy for the Hungarian minorities in the succession states.¹⁶

The seventy-fifth anniversary of the Treaty of Trianon also resulted in the publication of a special edition of the highly respected popular periodical *Historia*, founded and edited by one of Hungary's most gifted historians, Ferenc Glatz, in which twelve scholars examined the whole Trianon question. All of the enclosed studies are the products of detached historical analysis and political pragmatism, and their authors all seem to agree with Glatz's conclusions to the effect that the answer to Trianon is not revisionism, but the

sober appreciation... of the grievances rising on both sides of the frontiers [and at the same time] the tolerant mutual appreciation [of the pain] of all Hungarians, Romanians, Slovaks, South Slavs, Germans, Gypsies, and Jews who identify themselves as a separate nationality. It must be acknowledged that the national minority question is not simply the questions of Hungarians across our frontiers. It is rather a universal question in our region.... The people of Central Europe have to stop the hysteria of national victimization, where everyone — Hungarians, Romanians, Slovaks, Serbians, and Croatians — view themselves as victims of history.¹⁷

This kind of pragmatic view is also evident among the younger, Western education members of the immigrant elite, although many of their elders still cling to the idea of traditional revisionism. These Western educated intellectuals generally accept the geographical status quo, but they too view the current treatment of the Hungarian minorities — especially in Mečiar's Slovakia and pre-Constantinescu Romania — as an unacceptable violation of treaty obligations and of basic human rights. They generally favour the membership of these former Soviet satellites in the NATO and the EEC, because they believe that their joining or rejoining Western European civilization will oblige them to

accept the Western mode of behaviour toward their national minorities. These pragmatic professionals also hope that the expansion of the EEC into Central and Southeastern Europe will result in the rapid "spiritualization" of frontiers, and thus in elimination of the artificial boundaries between the various Hungarian communities in the Carpathian Basin.¹⁸

NOTES

1. Concerning the expatriate community's reaction to Trianon see Steven Béla Várdy and Ágnes Huszár Várdy, "Treaty of Trianon and the Hungarian Americans," in *Eurasian Studies Yearbook*, 69 (1997): 127-45; and Nandor F. Dreisziger, "The 'Justice for Hungary' Ocean Flight: The Trianon Syndrome in Immigrant Hungarian Society," in *Triumph in Adversity: Studies in Hungarian Civilization in Honor of Professor Ferenc Somogyi on the Occasion of his Ninetieth Birthday*, ed. Steven Béla Várdy and Ágnes Huszár Várdy (New York: East European Monographs, Columbia University Press, 1989): 573-89.

2. Gyula Szekfü, *Három nemzedék. egy hanyatló kor története* [Three Generations. The History of a Declining Age] (Budapest: Élet Irodalmi és Nyomdai R.T., 1920): 4.

3. For a summary of interwar developments concerning the Trianon syndrome see the following studies: Steven Béla Várdy, "Trianon in Interwar Hungarian Historiography," in *War and Society in East Central Europe. Vol. VI. Essays on World War I: Total War and Peacemaking. A Case Study of Trianon*, eds. Béla K. Király, Peter Pastor, and Ivan Sanders (New York: East European Monographs, Columbia University Press, 1982): 361-89; Steven Béla Várdy, "The Impact of Trianon upon the Hungarian Mind: The Nature of Interwar Hungarian Irredentism," in *Hungarian Studies Review*, 10, nos. 1-2 (1983): 21-42; and Ferenc Glatz, "Der Zusammenbruch der Habsburger Monarchie und die ungarische Geschichtswissenschaft," in *Études Historiques Hongroises* 1980, 2 vols. (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1980), II: 575-92.

4. One of the best examples of this rumbling and the authorities' reaction to it was the case of historian Károly Vigh who, on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the Treaty of Trianon, wrote a short inoffensive article for the journal *Honismeret*, 8, no. 3 (March 1980): 32-6. As soon as this issue of the periodical appeared in print, it was promptly withdrawn from circulation and replaced by another version without Vigh's article in it.

5. Péter Hanák, "Viszonylagos nemzettudat" [Relative National Consciousness], in *Élet és Irodalom* [Life and Literature], 25, no. 28 (July 25, 1981): 4-5.

6. For example: Mária Ormos, *Pádovától Trianonig, 1918-1920* [From Padova to Trianon, 1918-1920] (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1983); its English version: *From Padua to Trianon, 1918-1920* (New York: Social Sciences Monographs, Columbia University Press, 1990); Zsuzsa L. Nagy, "Trianon a magyar társadalom tudatában" [Trianon in the Consciousness of Hungarian Society], in *Szazadvég*, 1987, no. 3; *Erdély története* [History of Transylvania], ed. Béla Köpeczi, 3. köt. (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1986), III: 1728-32; and *Tanulmányok Erdély történetéből. Szakmai konferencia Debrecenben 1987. október 10-11* [Studies on Transylvanian History. Professional

Conference in Debrecen, October 10-11, 1987], ed. István Rác (Debrecen: Csokonai Kiadó, 1998): 143-50.

7. The best examples of these types of scholarly works are József Galántai's two related monographs: *Trianon és a kisebbségvédelem* [Trianon and Minority Protection] (Budapest: Maecenas, 1989), and *A trianoni békekötés, 1920* [The Peace Treaty of Trianon, 1920] (Budapest: Maecenas, 1990). Another relevant work is Jenő Gergely, ed., *Sorsdöntések: A kiegyezés 1867. A Trianoni béke 1920. A párizsi béke 1947* [Fateful Events: The Compromise 1867. The Peace of Trianon 1920; The Peace of Paris 1947] (Budapest, 1989). All three of these works were published at the time of the transformation from communism to democracy.

8. Zsuzsa L. Nagy, *Magyarország története, 1918-1945* [History of Hungary, 1918-1945] (Debrecen: Történelmi Figyelő Könyvek, 1995).

9. Ferenc Pölöskei, Jenő Gergely, and Lajos Izsák, eds., *20. századi magyar történelem. 1900-94* [Twentieth-Century Hungarian History, 1900-1994] (Budapest: Korona Kiadó, 1997).

10. The most significant of these handbooks was compiled by György Lelkes, *Magyar helységnév-azonosító szótár* [Dictionary of Hungarian Place Names] (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 1992). Also useful is the one published two years earlier under the title: *Magyar neve? Határokon túli magyar helységnévszótár* [Hungarian Names? Dictionary of Hungarian Place Names Beyond the Frontiers], ed. László Sebők (Budapest: Arany Lapok Kiadó, 1990).

11. The conference was officially entitled "Peace Treaties and National Communities in Europe" and it took place on June 1-3, 1995, in Budapest. Papers were presented in English, German and Hungarian. The conference proceedings have not been published as yet, therefore, as of now, only a few of the there presented papers have appeared in print. These include those by the present author and his wife: "Treaty of Trianon and the Hungarian-Americans" (see note no. 1). The Hungarian version of this article appeared earlier under the title: "Trianon, revizionizmus és az amerikai magyarság" [Trianon, Revisionism, and Hungarian-Americans], in *Korunk* [Our Age] (Cluj-Napoca, Romania), Third Series, 7, no. X (August 1996): 47-61.

12. Ernő Raffay, *Magyar tragédia. Trianon 75 éve* [Hungarian Tragedy - 75 Years of Trianon] (Budapest: Püski Kiadó, 1995).

13. Ernő Raffay, "Az MIDF és a határkérdés" [The Hungarian Democratic Forum and the Border Question], in *A XXXVI. Magyar Találkozó krónikája* [Proceedings of the Thirty-Sixth Hungarian Congress], ed. Gyula Nádás (Cleveland: Árpád Könyvkiadó, 1997): 37-40.

14. The thirty-three commentaries, including that of the author, were published in a volume entitled: *Trianon. Raffay Ernő: Magyar tragédia — Trianon 75 éve című könyv vitája* [Trianon. Debate over Ernő Raffay's "Hungarian Tragedy - 75 Years of Trianon] (Budapest: Püski Kiadó, 1976).

15. Never speak about it, but always think about it.

16. *Trianon Kalendárium, 1997* [Trianon Calendar, 1997] (Budapest: Püski Kiadó, 1997): 9-10.

16. Ferenc Glatz, "Trianon tegnap és ma" [Trianon Yesterday and Today], in *Historia*, 17, nos. 5-6 (1995): 44.

17. Concerning the current situation within the Hungarian-American community, see Várdy & Várdy, "Treaty of Trianon and Hungarian-Americans," pp. 137-41.