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TERRITORIAL REVISION
IN HUNGARY
1920–1945

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PREFACE

The Allied and Associated Powers signed the peace treaty with Hungary at the Grand Trianon Palace in Versailles on June 4, 1920. It meant the loss of much of the country's territory and the oppression of the Hungarian minorities beyond the new borders. Because the peace treaty was viewed as an unjust and humiliating judgment it was a major blow to the collective Hungarian national consciousness. The peace treaty, referred to right from the beginning as the peace dictate, took its place in the long line of Hungarian national disasters. Prominent Hungarian scholars and publicists compared the Peace Treaty of Trianon to the 1241–1242 devastating Mongol invasion, to the 1526 Battle of Mohács, where the victory of the Ottoman forces led to the destruction of much of the Hungarian elite, the fall of the medieval Hungarian kingdom, and the division of the country much of which came under Ottoman rule. Trianon was also compared to the defeat of the 1848–49 Revolution and War of Independence. In his opening speech at the first session of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1920, Albert Berzeviczy, its president, commented that the peace treaty “combined in itself almost all the characteristic features of our past national catastrophes and thus it is the greatest and gravest crisis that has ever put our life to the test.”¹

The national trauma triggered responses in Hungarian society which ranged from lethargy to a burning desire for revenge. At the same time, in the neighboring countries, the centuries-old and increasing dislike of the Hungarians seemed to be justified and was further increased by protectiveness for the newly acquired power and a fear of potential retributions.

A historical and psychological analysis of this extremely tense and emotional situation was attempted by an emblematic champion of Hun-

garian democracy, István Bibó, an international jurist and political scientist. In his study, written at the time of World War II, he approached the problem from two perspectives, from the heights of theory and from the horizon of practical problem solving. He concluded that the “miseries” of the central European countries were inherent in the recrudescence of the centuries-old territorial controversies and in the fact that nothing had been done to resolve them.²

At the time of Historic Hungary’s collapse and dismemberment, the crude and atavistic fears of being deprived of property became prominent in all of the countries concerned. These fears were rapidly expressed in propaganda slogans. While in Hungary the “Mindent vissza!” [Return everything!] slogan was trumpeted, in Romania, which had received the largest share of Hungary’s territorial loss, the slogan “Nici o brazdă!” [Not even a single furrow] could be heard. These slogans reflected not only public opinion but were instrumental in shaping foreign policy. The initial interpretations of the events, based on instinctive and emotional reactions were followed slowly by more rational political calculations and scientific approaches. The latter were more sober and refined but their trend did not affect the polarized opinions related to the new peace treaty arrangements.

After the World War the entire Hungarian society was permeated by the desire to have the peace treaty revised, while in the successor states, having benefited from Hungary’s losses, national public opinion was directed toward the maintenance of the *status quo* and the refusal of any revision. In the period between the two World Wars the relationship between Hungary and its neighbors was determined by this antagonism which continued to increase toward the end of the 1930s. There was not even a chance for any cooperation between them because the groups which might have been willing to consider such a move had little political influence at this time. Rigid nationalism became the leading political principle and the people in positions of power considered the rapid stabilization of their country and the unification and strengthening of their nation as their primary purpose. In this endeavor they would have been hampered by the principle of self-determination and by a fair-minded minority policy, advocated by the more liberal and democratic groups inclined toward international cooperation. The people in power felt the same way about the socialist proposals which

would have resolved the national problems by dissolving them in internationalism. The victorious countries intended to preserve all of their new powers while Hungary was striving to regain its lost territories. These mutually incompatible aims were an insurmountable barrier toward any compromise. Among the Hungarian groups, now under a foreign administration, opposition to the national majority groups became a determinant feature. The Hungarian minorities beyond the borders generally followed the principle laid down by the Transylvanian poet Sándor Reményik who said, “we will be destructive woodworms in an alien tree.” Unfortunately, the readiness for active cooperation that was present among the so-called “activists” who were recruited mainly from the younger age-groups and left-wing associations, did not receive any favorable reception in the countries having these Hungarian minorities.

After World War II international cooperation in east central Europe was given a framework by the internationalism promoted by the Soviet Union but this approach, labeled “universal brotherhood,” did not advance international understanding. Instead of normalizing relationships it accomplished only that national animosities were taken off the table, became forbidden subjects and were thus preserved for future generations in their original form. In the case of the Hungarians this resulted in the peculiar situation where raising the nationality question, including Trianon, became a criticism of the system and was viewed by the state socialist authorities as a hostile activity. Thus during the decades of oppression and silence generations were kept away from embracing the kind of patriotism that was tinted by nationalist thought.

The political transition at the end of the 1980s brought important changes in this area as well and the manifestations of national sentiments demonstrated a wide variety of form and content. The great majority of the population still abstained from participating in public life and from being active politically or, at least, was not active in matters related to nationalist issues. There were others, however, who believed that it was precisely the rebirth of individual and collective Hungarian identity filled with modern and valid content that was the most important societal task. According to this latter group, it was the

only effective way of accomplishing a complete change of the system.

The political community, actively responding to the nationality issue, was deeply divided in its perspectives and three distinct directions could be readily identified. The one with roots in the past, offered a mostly Christian, conservative and populist orientation, had little political influence during the era of state socialism. Its partisans, in silent opposition during the state socialist regime, received political satisfaction during the transition, and flaunting their faithfulness to the old principles during the period of oppression, demanded a decisive role in the new system. They also claimed to be the most authentic representatives of the Hungarian national spirit. The current that accepted the politically correct terminology of state socialism and subjected national feeling to internationalism and class perspectives, lost most of its appeal. Its adherents retreated to adjust their beliefs to the new circumstances. At the same time a liberal alternative for national identity came to the fore, which out of the dual heritage of traditional nationalism—namely integration and exclusion—endeavored to build on the former, thus stressing the need for active community-building. This school also wanted to minimize the traditions of competitiveness and thus assumed a central position between the other two directions.

The large segment of Hungarian society which, during the decades after World War II was taught to neglect the continuity of old traditions, was unprepared for seeing the national question as a primary issue. The revved-up public opinion gave all an opportunity to identify with one of the above mentioned currents and there was even a certain pressure to make a choice. Thus decisions were made frequently without conviction or the true understanding of the issues. During the individual and collective reassessment of Hungarian identity, passing judgment on the major events and actors of Hungarian history were given a new importance. One of the reasons for this was that the new parties, during their initiation into Hungarian politics, had to give an accounting of their affinity to the historic past. By selecting which items to identify with and which to condemn they sent a symbolic message of their political-ideological identity. The increased interest shown by the politicians in history and the endeavors to give the political parties a link to history provided a significant incentive to historiography. It removed the fetters from historical research and increased the general

public's interest in history. This general interest in the past, however, was given a political slant by the attempts of the parties to place the ideological and legitimating aspects of tradition into the foreground thus defining their expectations toward a specific, often slanted, interpretation of the past. This process led to the peculiar situation where the degree of return to the festive and tragic elements of national tradition became a yardstick of Hungarian self-confidence and national identity. In the focus of this symbolic way of thinking and talking there were two of the most significant items of twentieth-century Hungarian history that had been kept rigidly in the background by the previous regime. These were the Peace Treaty of Trianon and the 1956 Revolution. After more than half a century, Trianon again became a rallying cry and a significant symbol.

At the same time the unresolved difficulties surfaced in the relations between Hungary and some of its neighbors, not perhaps with the same intensity as in the past but nevertheless with the old reflexes and stereotypes. One of the reasons for this was that, as an inevitable result of their emergence from the Soviet system, the internal and external stability of the countries in east central Europe was temporarily in jeopardy. During the period of transition signs of grave economic, political and social crises appeared. In the case of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia these led to the ultimate dissolution of the two states. In the case of the former it took place via negotiation and of the latter via armed conflicts. In the struggle for a reshuffling of the political powers the situation of the national minorities again became important and so did the matter of the frontiers. Issues arose that revived the memory of mutual injuries and suspicions and for which the Treaty of Trianon became the retrospective symbol in East Central European public discussions. It is this symbolic significance of Trianon which provides such rigidity to the intellectual endeavors that it prevents a meritorious discussion of the problem. This has resulted in a situation where instead of fruitful dialog between the affected nations there has been only a tentative clarification of perspectives, even at the level of historiography.

Even in Hungary the process of removing Trianon from the stage of political and public oratory and referring it to the area of historical research has not taken place. One of the reasons for this was that in public discussions of national issues, such as national unity, national

character and the nation as the glue holding together tradition and social integrity, the Trianon question was raised over and over again and, in fact, discussions were frequently limited to this topic. The emphasis of public discussions changed from time to time with the shifts in the political spectrum. Between the two World Wars Trianon was an almost entirely political issue and even some of the historiographers protested against considering this national catastrophe as an integral part of Hungarian history. After the end of World War II, the 1946–47 Paris Peace Conference and Hungary's integration into the Soviet bloc, Trianon was rarely mentioned in public. This was due to the fact that in the Soviet bloc the airing of nationalities policies and frontier disputes between neighbors were taboo and also because the international position of the country had been determined by more recent international agreements and alliances and the Treaty of Trianon became part of the past so far as international law and policy were concerned.

Among the increased public activities subsequent to the change in regime, political and public thinking once again considered Trianon to be of major interest. The initiative for this was provided by the political and intellectual front that began to call itself the national side. The rival groups responded by saying that the debate should be referred to the world of experts and should be removed from public discussion because a symbolic and subjective approach prevented the development of a serious and meaningful exchange of ideas. In a slightly more consolidated form this situation prevails even today. Historians are increasingly debating specific details while the thoughts and attitudes of the politicians are continuously adjusted to the demands of party politics and global issues. In the meantime those Hungarians who suffer most from the disadvantages of national divisiveness, the Hungarian population of the neighboring countries, remain prisoners of minority existence and view the intellectual and political free-for-all in the mother country helplessly but with increasing bitterness.

The external and internal discords and the continuously renewed debates between countries, nations, ideologues, and generations seem to justify the conclusion that the lack of an overlap of the national and ethnic frontiers produce grave political problems in central Europe. The discords and debates also indicate that the major attempts during the twentieth century to establish some supranational political system in

this area as a solution to the problem were unsuccessful. It is for this reason that, to date, Trianon has been unable to find a final resting place in historical memory and continues to be part of the political scene. This situation is likely to prevail so long as national borders retain their significance, so long as the ruling majority nationality politicians discriminate against the minorities and so long as the affected countries cannot get beyond the social-psychological phobia related to real or assumed territorial change.

* * *

In what follows an attempt is made to study how the revisionist ideas about the Treaty of Trianon evolved and how they became manifest in foreign policy and in public life. As part of this we will first offer a brief overview of the dissolution of Historic Hungary and show the social, economic, and political framework created for Hungary by the peace treaty. We will investigate the foreign policy environment in which Hungarian diplomacy sought a path to success and how it tried to fit into the new international system while challenging some of the arrangements. In doing so we will discuss in detail the activities of the propaganda organizations which worked largely under the supervision and with the financial assistance of the government. We will also study the most important border rectification plans devised during this period and the way these plans were received. We will address the Hungarian irredentist cult, its public and solemn manifestations and the everyday manifestations characteristic of the private sector. In conclusion, we will show the process through which Hungarian foreign policy achieved territorial revisions, while the country gradually lost its neutrality, its independence and eventually entered World War II.

Discussion of the subject under these rubrics seems logical because it was the rapid and effective organizational flexibility of the government that produced, after the mid-1920s, a successful economic and foreign and domestic policy making it possible to pursue seriously the revision and the nullification of some of the Trianon peace terms. The foreign policy activities of the government were supplemented by the propaganda activities run by the controlled, but nominally independent social organizations. The latter continuously endeavored to

become truly independent and frequently struck out on independent paths. The products of this dual foreign policy were the revisionist plans that were formulated by the government and by the organizations and which were then submitted to the public opinion of the European countries. They also published wads of documents that tried to remedy Hungary's loss of prestige and undo the negative image which was creating serious problems for the country at home and abroad. The results of this critical attitude became manifest first and foremost among the Hungarians living in Hungary, in the neighboring countries, and secondarily in the diaspora. The natural and instinctive anti-Trianon sentiments and moods were converted by internal propaganda into convictions, into a cult and, in a smaller section of society, into factual knowledge and into a concept.