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TRIANON: A CONTINUING TRAGEDY

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The punitive treaty of Trianon, which tore Hungary asunder in violation of the vaunted principle of self-determination, is often thought of as a tragic historical event that has little or no relevance today. For some, Trianon is an emotionally laden event, while for others it is at best, an uncomfortable reminder of a past injustice that needs to be “gotten over.” Since the consequences of Trianon are still with us, however, it cannot be ignored.

Admittedly, the history leading up to Trianon is a complex one that in reality extends back well before 1920. Some, especially decision makers, would forget this history for the sake of expedience. This is aptly reflected in the context of the bilateral treaties Hungary was negotiating with Slovakia and Rumania, treaties highly favored by the United States:

In a separate meeting with [Hungarian Foreign Minister Laszlo] Kovacs [in 1995], the U.S. delegation focused on *Budapest's need to resolve its border and minority issues*. When [Richard] Holbrooke tried to make the point that the U.S. respected Hungary's history, [Daniel] Fried broke in to say: 'No we don't. *We hate it*. When you say Trianon we understand the political and emotional content of what you are trying to say but *we want to run screaming out of the room.*' (Emphasis added.)
Ronald D. Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era*, Columbia University Press (2002) at 148-149.

Trianon was indeed a tragic historical event and a grave injustice for the Hungarians. It made a mockery of President Wilson's vision for the post-war Europe and the lofty words he spoke to the world on February 1, 1918:

“There shall be no annexations, no contributions, no punitive damages. People are not to be handed about from one sovereignty to another by an international conference . . . 'Self-determination' is not a mere phrase. . . Every territorial settlement involved in this war must be made in the interest and for the benefit of the population concerned, and not as part of any mere adjustment or compromise of claims amongst rival States.”

But Trianon is not a relic of the past to be ignored. As several recent publications astutely suggest, Trianon, as part of a blunder of a massive scale, had far-reaching consequences that are still with us today and continue to affect both the lives of the Hungarian historical communities found in states neighboring Hungary and the region. It cannot, therefore, be relegated to the dustbin of history as some would prefer or ignored by “running and screaming out of the door.”

In his book *A Shattered Peace: Versailles 1919 and the Price We Pay Today*, (2008), at 191, David A. Andelman paints a vivid picture of the unconscionable treatment meted out to Hungary by the peace makers:

“Hungary . . . was in the process of being carved up – some might call it butchered. The goal of those doing the carving at the Peace Conference was to create new nations whose leadership and peoples had been at least nominally loyal to the victorious Allies during the war. Hungary was becoming the ultimate victim of every sort of prejudice, desire, and ultimate diplomatic and political error of the powers gathered in Paris. It had no real advocate there – no world-class virtuoso or wildly popular political figure who’d passed the war in America or Britain lobbying for his people. Its tiny population had sent few emigrants to the West to form a substantial voting bloc in any of the Allied nations. Few understood its people, its culture, even its language... Hungary, which might have played a key role as an anchor in Clemenceau’s cordon sanitaire, instead became a victim on every side.”

Andelman quotes from Harold Nicolson’s diary as to the cavalier manner the ill-conceived boundaries were drawn with little regard for the interests of the peace makers themselves, not to mention the millions of lives that would be adversely affected:

“During the afternoon there is the final revision of the frontiers of Austria. Go round to the Rue Nitot at luncheon and coach A.J.B. [Lord Balfour]. Down with him to the Quai d’Orsay. There (in that heavy tapestried room, under the simper of Marie de Medicis, with the windows open upon the garden and the sound of water sprinkling from a fountain and from a lawn-hose)—the fate of the Austro-Hungarian Empire is finally settled. Hungary is partitioned by these five distinguished gentlemen—indolently, irresponsibly partitioned—while the water sprinkles on the lilac outside—while the experts watch anxiously—while A.J.B., in the intervals of dialectics on secondary points, relapses into somnolence—while [Secretary of State] Lansing draws hobgoblins upon his writing pad—while Pichon crouching in his large chair blinks owlshly as decision after decision is actually recorded—while [Italian Foreign Minister Baron Sidney] Sonnino. . . is ruggedly polite—while [Japan’s Baron Nobuki] Makino, inscrutable and inarticulate, observes, observes, observes . . . After some insults flung like tennis balls between Tardieu and Lansing, Hungary loses her South. Then Czecho-North and East . . . Then tea and macaroons. Bob Vansittart’s play in the evening. *Id.*, at 163-4.”

And as for the terrible consequences of the flawed “peace making” at Versailles, including Trianon – consequences that should be the focus of our concern rather than an emotional outcry – Patrick Buchanan in his book, *Churchill, Hitler and the Unnecessary War: How Britain Lost Its Empire and the West Lost the World*, (2008), concludes on page 111 that the “men of Versailles had brought home the peace of vengeance the people wanted. Their children would pay the price for their having failed to bring home a peace of justice. That price would be 50 million dead in the war that would come out of the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles.”

Andelman goes even farther:

“If there was a single moment in the twentieth century when it all might have been different, this was the moment: Paris, 1919. The end of the Great War, which in perfect hindsight we call World War I, changed everything. Certainly the peace imposed at Versailles by the Western powers—Britain, France, Italy, and the United

States—on the vanquished, not to mention the weak, the powerless, the orphaned, and the friendless, determined much of what went wrong for the balance of the century and beyond. . . . The lapses of that brief period in Paris in 1919 were driven by a chain of diplomatic DNA that has become imbedded, with often the most pernicious results, in our own world order. Andelman, at 2-3.”

The winds of change swept through the region and rearranged the old Cordon Stalinaire after 1989. Ironically, that change left untouched the very people who have suffered the most under a punitive treaty – the thousand plus year old indigenous Hungarian communities living under the rule of states that are mostly different from those stipulated at Trianon 89 years ago. The Hungarian historical communities continue to live as minorities in the newly divided successor states.

The issue is not their status but that they are still living with the stifling *status quo* that threatens their culture, as they are denied a host of rights, such that would enable them to exercise a degree of local self-rule and preserve their unique culture and identity within existing borders. All the while, the number of Hungarians living as minorities throughout the region dwindles due to the inhospitable environment in their own home.

For example, the Hungarian minority is still subjected both to discriminatory policies and to an intolerance that is neither addressed nor condemned by Slovak officials who incomprehensibly deny Hungarians the right to effectively participate in public affairs, particularly in matters affecting them. In other words, Hungarians are denied the right to autonomy. Restrictions on the right of that minority to be educated in the mother tongue are indefensible. Slovak National Party chairman Jan Slota’s xenophobic, anti-Semitic and anti-Hungarian outbursts, *e.g.*, “Hungarians are the cancer of the Slovak nation, without delay we need to remove them from the body of the nation,” are tolerated by the government. This hate mongering, especially by a government coalition party, has had a pernicious influence on Slovak society, as evidenced by incidents, such as the “Death to Hungarians” graffiti that appeared in Nyitracsehi (Cechynce) in 2008. Inexplicably, the rehabilitation of Janos Esterhazy is denied. Esterhazy was the leader of the Hungarian Party in Tiso’s Fascist Slovakia and was the only Member of Parliament to vote against the deportation of Jews in 1942. He died in a Slovak prison.

The situation in Rumania is hardly better. The Resolution of the (Rumanian) Assembly at Gyulafehervar/Alba Iulia, December 1, 1918 has been and is ignored until this day. That resolution promised the Hungarian minority autonomy: “Complete national freedom for the peoples jointly inhabiting. All peoples have the right to their own education and government in their own language, with their own administration, and by individuals chosen from among themselves.” Despite this promise, Rumania today virtually treats the legitimate request for autonomy of the Szekelyland as an act of treason

Rumania violates its Constitution guaranteeing minority rights, including the right to be educated in one’s mother tongue at all levels. Two decades after the collapse of Communism, Rumania has failed to restore the independent Hungarian state university in Cluj-Napoca/Kolozsvar that had been merged into the Rumanian university under the Communists.

An egregious violation of human rights occurred when two Hungarian professors – Peter Hantz and Lehel Kovacs – were expelled from Babes-Bolyai University for placing parallel Hungarian inscriptions below Rumanian language signs at the so-called multicultural institution. It should be noted that although university officials had decided to allow the placement of bilingual signs by January 10, 2006, they stonewalled until Professor Hantz sought to implement the university’s decision.

These and other similar continuing consequences justify, indeed mandate, that Trianon be remembered—democracy, rule of law and minority rights must at long last be respected in a region that has suffered enough due to the ignorance and ill-will that governed a vengeful and short-sighted Paris, 1919.