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Big Dreams of Small Nations. Territorial Changes After World War I in Hungarian Collective Memory[1]

Abstract

Even though more than a hundred years have passed since the end of the First World War, the Hungarian historical consciousness has still not been able to fully come to terms with the lost war and its consequences, namely the Treaty of Trianon. One important reason for this phenomenon, which many authors consider to be a „cultural trauma", is that the „Hungarian national space" imagined by Hungarian national activists at the time of the unfolding of Modern Nationalisms collapsed in 1918, as recorded in the 1920 peace treaty and reaffirmed in the 1947 one. From the outset, the space considered by the Hungarian elites as Hungarian overlapped with the similar visions of neighbouring non-Hungarian national movements, and at the end of the First World War the latter's concepts were realised – at the expense of the Hungarian. The present essay traces the process of the emergence, competition and reorganisation of Hungarian and rival "national spaces" from the 19th century to the present day.

1 This text was produced in the Trianon 100 Research Group.

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Introduction

On 11 November 2018, the world commemorated the centenary of the end of World War I with a large-scale event in Paris. More than seventy heads of state or government attended the ceremony at the invitation of French President Emmanuel Macron.[2] In addition to many current representatives of the former Entente Powers and their allies, some of the present-day leaders of the former adversaries – the losers – were also present at the special anniversary. From the successor states of the former Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the Austrian chancellor, the Czech prime minister and the presidents of Slovakia, Romania, Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia all visited Paris. However, no high-ranking state leader represented Hungary at the ceremony. This in itself would not be too surprising, as the heads of state or government of the United Kingdom or Poland were not present either. However, while the UK celebrated at home and sent a minister to attend the French celebrations, and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk explained his absence by having to attend a national holiday in his own country– also linked to the end of World War I – on the same day, Budapest could not even invoke the latter reason. In Hungary – apart from a few professional events – the historic event was not commemorated in any meaningful way. Of course, the Hungarian passivity could be explained by several, even trivial reasons. However, the most obvious conclusion seems to be that Hungarian society – and certainly the political and intellectual elite currently leading the country – has not come to terms with the consequences of the war, even one hundred years after it ended.

2 See World leaders mark 100 years since WWI end; Guillot, 2018; Hasselbach, 2018.

It is a fact that Hungary has never had a tradition of commemorating 11 November, the anniversary of the armistice signed by the representatives of Germany and the Entente in the Forest of Compiègne. Not least because the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy had already signed an armistice with the Entente more than a week before, on 3 November 1918, and the war continued for about one year more on the territory of Hungary, with some regions of the country remaining under foreign occupation until 1921 (Fel a szegycsontig, 2018, pp. 1–3). However, in the other Central European countries, in many of which the violence did not cease on 11 November either – to think of the short but ill-remembered Czechoslovakian–Polish conflict, or the even longer and more ruthless Polish–Soviet war – the common anniversary in 2018 was nevertheless accepted, and linked to the centenary of independence or unification of these nations. Naturally, these commemorations were not identical: the South Slavic countries, as well as Czechia and Slovakia commemorated the birth of no longer existing common states, Romania celebrated the unification of the territories inhabited by Romanians, whereas the other great "loser" of the Monarchy, Austria, dedicated its anniversary programmes to the founding of the state and the construction of Austrian identity. What all these countries had in common, however, was that they commemorated the autumn of 1918 as a historic turning point of great significance.

This was also true in Hungary, where the period was similarly the subject of much discussion in the autumn of 2018. However, Hungary's official discourse and debates on history and the politics of remembrance differed from the Europe's. On 31 October 2018, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán gave a speech on the centenary of the assassination of former Hungarian prime minister István Tisza. Orbán spoke about Europe's suicide in connection with World War I, claiming that the war "was in fact lost not by the Central Powers, but by all of Europe" (Viktor Orbán's speech at the commemoration..., 2018). Mária Schmidt, a conservative historian and government commissioner responsible for coordinating commemorations of the war, said at the opening ceremony of the final part of a spectacular series of exhibitions on "Europe's fraternal war" that the exhibition broke with the interpretative framework "forced on Hungarians by

the victors" and also reflected in the ongoing celebrations (Szakítás a győztesek értelmezési, 2018). Furthermore, debates with often ideological undertones have also been revived in connection with the events of Hungarian history in 1918–1919.[3]

In Hungarian historical consciousness, however, the above-mentioned historic turning point is associated not with the autumn of 1918, but with another symbolic date, the signing of the Treaty of Trianon on 4 June 1920. Even though this day marks the regaining of Hungarian independence – which, according to historical tradition, was lost at the Battle of Mohács in 1526 – it also signifies the dismemberment of the Kingdom of Hungary and its transformation into a small state, as well as the loss of national unity because every third Hungarian became separated from their homeland as a consequence of the treaty.

Therefore, the end of World War I appears as a real national disaster in Hungarian collective consciousness. This interpretation already emerged in the interwar period, and made its return after decades of state socialism, when state power forced it out of the public eye. Since then, it has remained an enduring topic for Hungarian intellectuals and politicians alike, and it has also been given a prominent role in the politics of remembrance under governments thematising and instrumentalising the national question, including the Orbán governments which have been in office for more than twelve years now. In this context, it is primarily portrayed as one of the greatest tragedies (and "traumas") of Hungarian history (Kovács 2015, p.59), often embedded in the ethnocentric discourse of loss and self-victimisation which can now be considered traditional.

Thus, Hungary has not forgotten World War I, but mainly remembers it – and especially its consequences – in connection with "Trianon."[4] This is what happened at the centenaries in 2018 and 2020. Furthermore, since over time the name of the château near Paris came to be associated with the questions of the dissolution of historical Hungary and the fate of Hungarian minorities, the issue

3 See e.g. Stumpf, 2018; Jankovics, 2019; Ezerszer kegyetlenebbek leszünk, mint a burzsoázia hóhérai, 2019.

4 In her article cited above, Éva Kovács claims that the traumatic experience of WWI became "sublimed" into the memory of "Trianon" (ibid. 95).

remains unresolved, given the about two million Hungarians still living in neighbouring countries. In fact, a solution to this issue is not entirely possible or will be very difficult to find, and does not depend primarily on Hungary.

What does depend on Hungary, however, is what the Budapest governments do about this issue or how they deal with it. Following the 2010 electoral victory of Fidesz–KDNP, one of the first acts of the new Parliament was to make the 4 June anniversary official; however, it was not declared to be a day of mourning, but "the day of national unity". On this day, politicians and other public figures, as well as historians and other intellectuals usually recall the circumstances and impact of the Treaty of Trianon, commemorative events are held in schools, and the media also cover the topic. Even though the declared function of the memorial day is to raise awareness of solidarity with Hungarian communities living outside Hungary, public commemorations continue to be dominated by the topos of national disaster. Speeches and publications by right-wing and government politicians often employ the motif of intrigue and wrongdoing of internal "anti-national" forces, while Hungary and Hungarians are usually portrayed as victims of an unjust peace treaty ("dictate") imposed on them by selfish or indifferent great powers and greedy neighbours. This discourse only showed certain changes as the centennial anniversary approached: while the image of the internal enemy remained, the role of the neighbouring nations was increasingly overshadowed by the export of liberal democracy by the great powers, especially the USA, and by the Bolshevik aspirations for world revolution (Egry, 2020, pp. 123–142). However, in 2020, the Hungarian government has shifted the focus from grievances to the importance of national solidarity, "reunification" of the Hungarian nation across the borders and a positive vision for the future.

By now, "Trianon" has transformed from a tragic place of remembrance in Hungarian collective memory into an important element of Hungarian national identity. This is evidenced by the incessant public debates on the politics of remembrance and history (Laczó, 2013), the myths and legends surrounding the issue (Ablonczy, 2010; Ablonczy, 2022), and the newly built or restored Trianon monuments which have been growing in number continuously since the regime

change, and at an accelerated pace since the late 2000s (Boros, 2003, pp. 3–21), and which can be found all over Hungary and sometimes even in neighbouring countries.[5] We could also mention the multitude of books, articles, documentaries even a rock opera (!) about Trianon and Hungarians living abroad, as well as the plethora of maps, stickers, badges and posters depicting historical Hungary, which occasionally provoke indignant reactions from the neighbouring states.[6] Manifestations of the Hungarian "Trianon syndrome" are so spectacular that they are visible even outside the Hungarian-speaking public, as they also attract the attention of foreigners.[7]

It is perhaps clear from the above that the Hungarian memory of World War I and its conclusion is rather different from the way the war is remembered in other European nations. The resentment in Hungarian public consciousness against the new order after 1918–1920 – some elements and current manifestations of which I have already alluded to – can be explained by several factors (Zahorán, 2013, pp. 9–54). Much criticism has been levelled at the very manner in which the peace was concluded: representatives of Hungary – similarly to those of the other defeated states – were not allowed to participate in the negotiations, and although the Hungarian delegation was given an opportunity to present its stance, this had no impact on the final terms. This is reflected in referring to the peace treaty as a "dictate", which has become increasingly common in Hungarian discourse on Trianon in recent years. Hungarian political and cultural elites had a difficult time accepting the fundamental change in Hungary's status: the country, which used to be a partner state of a major European power (Austria-Hungary), shrank to an Eastern-Central European minor state with virtually no global significance, surpassed in several respects even by the previously scorned and despised neighbouring nations. Losses of economic resources and Hungarian national wealth are also often

5 See: https://trianon100.hu/emlekmuvek

6 See for example the Romanian and Slovakian responses objecting to a map on Viktor Orbán's wall or the supporter scarf, displaying the outline of historical Hungary, that he wore in the autumn of 2022.

7 See e.g. the volume of reportage by Ziemowit Szczerek, also published in Hungarian: *Via Carpatia – roaming in Hungary and the Carpathian Basin*, 2022.

mentioned as grievances: the former included a significant part of raw materials and mineral resources, as well as its access to the sea, while the latter included all the investments made in the decades before 1918, which since then enriched the successor states. One of the most important reasons for the Hungarian frustration, however, was the derailment of Hungarians' nation-building efforts, which picked up momentum in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. One third of Hungarians, whose numbers grew due to both forced and spontaneous assimilation processes, and who benefited the most from the modernisation of the country, became members of a minority after Trianon, in conditions that were not too favourable to minorities.

Although some of these factors have faded or decreased in importance over time, and others were partially remedied by modernisation (Tomka, 2018, pp. 70–76) and European integration, it is still apparent after more than a century that certain grievances have proved extremely persistent. Of these, my article will address a complex set of issues, some aspects of which still reappear as acute problems today. These include the collapse – or at least the radical restructuring – of the "imagined Hungarian national space" after 1918. This covers both the transformation of the mental map of Hungarians and the severance of a significant part of the Hungarian population from Hungary, together with its numerous consequences.

Methodology

In this essay, I will first attempt to outline how the "imagined Hungarian national space" emerged and became fixed in the context of similar – and usually intersecting – ideas of Central European national movements in direct contact with it. After this, focusing primarily on the interactions of the Slovakian and Romanian national spaces with the Hungarian one, I will try to answer the questions of what changes were brought about by the military defeat and dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, how the new peace system emerged after World War I, and in what ways this determined the new order itself. Would it have been possible to reconcile competing national visions without traumatic

consequences for any of the parties, or at least to significantly mitigate the grievances?

There is a vast body of secondary literature on World War I and the evolution of the new order, increasingly available in Hungarian as well; by now, not only the most significant sources have been published, but they have also been analysed. A detailed overview of Hungarian and international historiography on this subject is outside the scope of this paper, but lately the Institute of History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, various institutes of history of the Romanian Academy, the Trianon 100-Lendület [Momentum] Research Group[8] of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, as well as several universities and other research institutes have all published entire book series and numerous other publications related to the centenaries. These reflect relatively accurately the still noticeable national embeddedness and orientation of our region's historiography. Although the national perspective prevails with varying intensity in different countries, few research groups or authors can – or want to – escape some degree of ethnocentrism,[9] while current governmental politics of remembrance also make their presence felt. But even if one succeeds in transcending the national interpretative frameworks, the dissemination of academic research and academic dialogue continue to be restricted by the limits of national languages.

In my paper, I will attempt to answer the questions raised above by drawing on historical literature on the subject published mainly in Hungary, and to a lesser extent in the neighbouring countries. With regard to "imagined national spaces", I find it important to note that I, too, consider the topic of national identity – which is rarely problematised by the authors of ethnocentric historical narratives – to be a rather complex issue: an issue which even censuses and ethnic maps striving for accuracy inevitably oversimplify, and

8 The present author is also a member of the research group, which has been active since 2016.

9 In a Hungarian context, this is the explicit aim of the of the transnationally oriented NEPOSTRANS ERC project led by Gábor Egry: https://1918local.eu/, but also an objective of other professional workshops, such as the Trianon 100 Research Group.

which is instrumentalised in a downright distorted manner by (ethno-)political discourses. Although – for want of a better solution – I will also use such data in this article, a critical approach to ethnicity[10] is closer to me than the sharp linguistic boundaries, the stable, solid identity categories or the monolithic communities that are taken for granted by "traditional" national and nation-state perspectives. I will also try to filter out both spatially and temporally the nationalising effects of nation-state logic especially as regards present-day nation states, the (multi-ethnic) medieval antecedents of Hungarian statehood, the pre-modern territorial-based Hungarian identity and forms of identity based on social, denominational and local affiliations.

The emergence of the "imagined Hungarian national space"

National space as a geographical landscape as well as a political and cultural place – as Gábor Gyáni puts it in one of his studies – is a relatively new historical construct. "The way a nation appropriated for itself a slice of physical space as its natural living space … is the result of the historical processes of the past one or two hundred years" (Gyáni, 2010, p. 237) "National spaces" were "imagined" and created mainly in the 19th–20th centuries by national elites, who then made these spaces their home through their "nationalised" history, traditions, culture and science (ibid., pp. 247–258). These spaces, in accordance with the logic of national and nation-state territoriality, gradually acquired more distinct outlines, thus becoming a central element of national identity, with national activists even projecting them back into the past (ibid., pp. 239 and 249).

The national spaces of Central and Eastern Europe evolved as a result of the activities of national movements emerging within multi-ethnic empires: the Habsburg, the Ottoman and the Russian Empires. However, the "national maps" drawn by nation-building intellectuals, scholars, artists and politicians, i.e., the representations of those territories which are a nation's "due", as it were – overlapped

10 See e.g. Brubaker, 2002, pp. 163–189; Egry, 2015; Ficeri, 2019.

in many cases (Kolarz, 2003; Sugar, 2002). This led to tensions and numerous conflicts from the start, as we will see below.

The Hungarian liberal nationalists who had been promoting the idea of the "imagined Hungarian national space" from the 19th century onwards took as their starting point the territory of the former independent Kingdom of Hungary before the Turkish wars, and their policies were in fact aimed at its restoration (Gyurgyák, 2007, pp. 27–54). However, there were several obstacles to this in the early 19th century, when advocates of Hungarian liberal nationalism did not yet possess a decisive influence in the country's public life.

The first of these was the lack of sovereignty: for centuries, Hungary had been essentially ruled from Vienna, by a "foreign" dynasty. Although this was achieved through the institutions of the Hungarian state system, the Habsburgs always put the interests of the empire before particular interests, that is the interests of Hungary as a country and a nation. Hungarian nationalists wanted to achieve at least a reversal of these priorities. The division of the country's territory was another important factor: in the early 19th century not only Croatia, but also the Military Frontier bordering the Ottoman Empire, the Grand Principality of Transylvania and the Partium (the Parts) were governed separately. Therefore, Hungarian elites sought to unite these regions and their resources with Hungarian territories. Another serious difficulty was the economic and social backwardness of the Kingdom of Hungary, compared not only to Western Europe, but also to the more developed provinces of the Habsburg Monarchy. The extremely slow pace of modernisation also limited the possibilities of Hungarian elites in several respects, impeding the realisation of national aspirations. One symbol of the circumstances hindering the Hungarian national movement is the fact that, after the 18th-century Germanization attempt was repelled, it took more than half a century before Latin, the former official language of the Kingdom of Hungary – which also served as a means of communication mediating between speakers of different languages – was finally replaced by Hungarian.[11]

11 Ibid. This was only achieved in 1844.

The obstacle that ultimately proved decisive, however, was the high ethnic diversity of the country's population, the significance of which went long unrecognized by Hungarian nationalists. This is not overly surprising, because it appeared as only a vague problem in the initial stages of language-based nationalism. Later, however, it proved fatal for the historical framework of the state that on the territory claimed by Hungarian elites in the name of the Hungarian national ideal, the proportion of Hungarian native speakers was barely more than 40% of the total population in the mid-19th century. Although the central, most fertile regions of the country generally had a Hungarian majority, Hungarian native speakers formed minority groups or lived scattered in the vast peripheral regions. More importantly, national movements had also emerged in the non-Hungarian population by the 19th century, and their influence grew unstoppably, albeit to varying degrees. In time, these movements also formulated their national goals, including a demarcation of what they considered their own national territory.

Hungarian liberal nationalists aimed to restore the unity of the – rather anachronistically interpreted – medieval Hungarian state. Only Croatia was allowed some degree of separation within the "Hungarian national space" they imagined, which extended from the Adriatic coast to Slavonia and the Banat, to Transylvania and the mountain ranges of the north-western Carpathians; that is, it practically covered the entire Carpathian Basin. Hungarian national activists drew primarily on historical traditions, but their ultimate goal was to create a modern, *Hungarian-speaking* nation state. Although they did not yet have accurate data about ethnicities at the time, and the ethnic conditions of the territories in question were known only approximately before the second half of the 19th century, both certain writings and their own experiences made clear the multi-ethnic character of the imagined Hungary. Adherents of the Hungarian national movement tried to solve this contradiction using the pre-modern, territorial-based Hungarian identity, still present in certain places – which embodied allegiance to the kingdom – then by the concept of the "Hungarian political nation," created in the spirit of modern nationalism (ibid. 74–79). However, although they recognized the *cultural* and *linguistic* rights of various

non-Hungarian ethnicities within the *political* framework of the Hungarian state, the majority of Hungarian nationalists were adamant about the country's territorial unity. Besides the rational and pragmatic arguments for building a nation-state, this was also supported by such manifestations of the romantic zeitgeist as the topos of the "Hungarian island" surrounded by a "Slavic sea", or the even more sinister Herderian vision of the death of the nation. In the light of all this, the need to create the strongest possible Hungarian nation and state may well have seemed justified.

Nevertheless, this Hungarian demand intersected with similar aspirations of national activists representing the non-Hungarian ethnic groups of Hungary, which also crystallized during the 19th century. Croatian nationalists disputed Hungarian claims to certain parts of Slavonia and to the sea access; what is more, they wanted to expand Croatia with other South Slavic territories. The Serbian national movement in Hungary wanted to see the establishment of an independent Serbian province in the southern region, whose population became considerably mixed after the Turkish wars, and this was temporarily established between 1849 and 1860. Romanian nation-builders aimed to obtain equality within Transylvania, as well as maintain the separate status of the province, so that the Romanian majority within the population could prevail. They also had some success in this after 1849, but after the 1867 union they demanded in vain the restoration of Transylvania's autonomy. There were also ideas, for example in a 1906 book by Aurel C. Popovici, that Transylvania should be united with other Romanian-populated regions of the Monarchy to form one of the countries in a federalized "United Nations of Greater Austria." Union with the Romanian principalities and later with Romania was not – yet – a realistic idea. Parallel to this, the representation of the Romanian national space gradually included all regions of Hungary with a Romanian population.[12] The various "national maps" of Slovak nationalists came also to be gradually fixed, until "Slovakia" attained its still somewhat vague contours in the area between the Tatras and the Danube, and

12 On this topic, see Ábrahám, 2018; especially pp. 353–357. On Popovici's claim see also Balogh, 2018, pp. 15–27.

between the Czech–Slovak border and the Rusyn region. The "Slovak District of Upper Hungary" (*Okolie*) first proposed in 1848–1849 and publicised again in 1861, would have comprised a somewhat smaller, but more precisely defined area, which would have included the Hungarian counties with a Slovak majority.[13]

The reconciliation of national ideas in Hungary was also influenced to a great extent by the experiences of the anti-Habsburg revolution and the war of independence of 1848–1849, when conflicts escalated into violence in several places. Ethnic civil war broke out in the southern territories and Transylvania, but clashes of an ethnic nature also occurred in the northern Hungarian regions. Although the demands of the non-Hungarian nationalities were not granted in spite of the suppression of the Hungarian war of independence, and there remained even less chance for this after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise, representatives of the national movements strove to keep them in the foreground, and they continued to re-emerge in various forms until World War I. At the same time, the majority of Hungarian nationalists concluded from these conflicts that Hungarian dominance in the Carpathian Basin could only be maintained through a compromise with the Habsburgs. There were some who promoted an agreement with the non-Hungarian nations instead, especially politicians forced into emigration, like Lajos Kossuth and László Teleki (Gyurgyák, 2007, pp. 56–64), but the ideas of the proponents of an Austro–Hungarian compromise ultimately prevailed (incidentally, Teleki was one of the few Hungarian politicians who – after the Hungarian Jacobins at the end of the 18th century – would not consider ethnic-based federalization of Hungary unthinkable).

The Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 gave the green light to efforts to unite the Hungarian national space. Hungarian nationalists no longer wanted to make concessions, and they rigidly opposed any demands by the national minorities for regional autonomy or separation. The laws granted certain linguistic, educational and cultural rights to the non-dominant nationalities, at least in

13 On this topic, see Szarka, 2008, pp. 143–161; Ábrahám, 2016, pp. 102–119; Viršinská, 2017, pp. 127–142; Letz, 2017, pp. 157–171; and Kollai, 2021, pp. 219–224.

principle, but the majority of the Hungarian elites believed that only an indivisible and united Hungarian state could guarantee the development of the Hungarian nation and its protection against Russian (Pan-Slavic) and other threats. The "Hungarian national space" could not be diminished by its ethnic alternatives.

In the decades following the Compromise, the dominance of Hungarian elites gradually consolidated in Hungary, to which the peculiar parliamentary system, which conserved the existing public, political and social order, largely contributed (Gerő, 2017; Révész, 2022). The logic of the unified state of the "state-forming nation" – which essentially followed the French model of nation-state building – in time extended beyond the domains of politics and public life of the Hungarian Kingdom. This in turn provided less and less space for the non-Hungarian nationalities reduced to "minorities" (Gyurgyák, 2007, pp. 90–134; Nagy, 2017, pp. 139–157). While the Hungarian political elite strove to integrate non-Hungarian politicians, it either ignored their national movements – as in the case of the Slovakians –, or was willing to negotiate minor concessions at most – as with the Romanians in the early 20th century (Falusi, 2020, pp. 35–41). Parallel to this, the Hungarian leadership made several efforts which also affected the ethnic boundaries of the Hungarians. It put the state at the mercy of the Hungarian nationalizing aspirations, especially in the fields of public life, as well as education, culture and in part the economy. All this combined with the spontaneous social processes accompanying modernization – such as the Hungarisation of the German and Jewish bourgeoisie, and partially of the Slovak population (especially those living in dispersal) – which led to the Hungarisation mainly of the urban population.

While the realistic ideas of Hungarian elites reckoned with the preservation of the existing Hungarian positions, the consolidation of the Hungarian settlement area, and spontaneous Hungarisation – especially in the cities – their more daring plans aimed at intensifying the assimilation of the nationalities and strengthening the *Hungarian* character of the Kingdom of Hungary. Correspondingly, the national question often oscillated between two extreme positions in contemporary Hungarian public opinion. At one end of

the scale there was the idea that Hungarians would be pushed into the background in "their own country", together with the threat posed by Illyric, Pan-Slavic and Daco-Romanian aspirations, which occasionally led to downright hysterical outbursts; at the other end it was not uncommon to triumphantly celebrate the growth and achievements of the Hungarian nation, or to paint confident visions which foresaw the historic mission of Hungarians extending even beyond their borders, and their bright future.[14]

As far as the threats to the "imagined Hungarian national space" are concerned, an early example of drawing attention to these can be found in the work of Béla Grünwald, a subprefect from northern Hungary. In his pamphlet, which garnered great attention, the politician and historian writes about the sad history of Slovakised Hungarian villages: "It wrenches one's heart when one is in Upper Hungary and sees these conditions directly before oneself" (*A Felvidék: Grünwald Béla …*, 2011, p. 89). Grünwald later – besides writing on the subject – also tried to directly change the situation by closing down the Slovak cultural organization Matica slovenská and Upper Hungarian secondary schools teaching in Slovakian, which made him one of the most notorious representatives of Hungarian nationalism in Slovak historical consciousness (Demmel, 2001).

Sándor József Pákéi, secretary general and then president of the Hungarian Cultural Society of Transylvania [Erdélyi Magyar Közművelődési Egyesület, EMKE], an organization established to spread Hungarian culture in Transylvania, recalled the circumstances of the society's foundation in a similar vein twenty-five years later. In the ornate commemorative volume of EMKE published in 1910, the author discusses at length the various Pan-Slavic, Pan-Germanic and "Daco-Romanian" goals (Pákéi, 1910, pp. 23–41), to which he considers the strengthening of Hungarian national activism to be the appropriate response. Among the antecedents of Hungarian activism, he mentions the efforts to spread the Hungarian national spirit and the Hungarian language in Upper Hungary (ibid., p. 67), or to mobilize Hungarians by invoking the "Vlachization" (Romanisation) of certain counties in southern and central Transylvania (ibid., p. 71).

14 See Romsics, 2004, and more recently Varga, 2020.

Gusztáv Beksics, another renowned Hungarian politician-publicist of the period, emphasized the importance of the Hungarisation of cities. In one of his writings, he calls cities the bastions of Hungarians, and, citing Western European examples, he claimed that "A dozen great Hungarian cities will preserve the Hungarian nation in the next millennium more surely than ancestry and the counties did in the previous one." He describes the Hungarisation of certain regional centres as a real fight, in which Hungarisation goes hand in hand with modernisation. He includes Pozsony (Bratislava, today in Slovakia), Trencsén (Trenčín, today in Slovakia), Kassa (Košice, today in Slovakia), Máramarossziget (Sighetu Marmației, today in Romania), Arad (today in Romania), Temesvár (Timișoara, today in Romania) and Lugos (Lugoj, today in Romania) among "the cities singled out for the purposes of Hungarisation". "Fortunately, Kolozsvár [Cluj-Napoca, today in Romania] in Transylvania and Nagyvárad [Oradea, today in Romania] in Hungary have already been conquered for the Hungarian cause. Gyulafehérvár [Alba Iulia, today in Romania], Brassó [Brașov, today in Romania] and Szeben [Sibiu, today in Romania] have to be conquered hereafter." Beksics even draws up a schedule: "Firstly, we have to conquer Hungary, understood in the strictest sense; the effects of this will then be felt in Transylvania as well" (2005, p. 85).

The author of an article published in 1893 comments with satisfaction on the Hungarisation of Nyitra (Nitra, today in Slovakia) in Upper Hungary: "Within ten years, it first became entirely Hungarian itself, and then it made a good portion of the Uplands Hungarian. And in these ten years it not only learned the language, but the Hungarian spirit also grew unbreakable roots in its heart. Indeed, if we look back twenty years into the past, we may notice with wonder that the Nyitra of the time of oppression vanished from the face of the earth, and something entirely new has grown up in its place. A modern Hungarian provincial centre" (Magyarország városai VI. Nyitra, 1893, p. 17).[15] Barely three years later, however, an article in the same newspaper reported on the partial failure of "national cultural policy" in sombre tones: "Demographic statistics

15 On Nitra, see also e.g. Krekovič, Mannová, Krekovičová, 2005, pp. 134–149.

reveal sad lessons about the boundaries of the Hungarian language. Let the alarm bells for our national cultural policy ring to the clouds against the Tóts in the north and the Vlachs in the east" (Felhők, 1896, p. 1).

The decennial censuses attesting to the rapid growth of the Hungarian-speaking population could also be used to mobilise the society to protect or expand the "Hungarian national space". For example, before the data of the last Hungarian census of 1910 were processed, a newspaper article assessed the developments favourable to Hungarians as follows: "The struggle is over in the cities: there, the Hungarian cause has been ensured for ten years, and the nationalities can no longer dispute the result. The battle rages on far from the centres, on the peripheries; with what success, will be determined by the new census" (*A népszámlálás sulypontja*, 1911, p. 31). The optimism also influenced the prospects of the above-mentioned Hungarian expansion. It is perhaps writer and journalist Jenő Rákosi who is quoted most often in this context, who wrote in 1902 that "We need no more than thirty million Hungarians for us to play the leading role in European history in this place, in this land, and the East of Europe will be ours!" (*Az amerikai magyarok zászlója*, 1902, p. 3).

In his influential volume of 1912, Oszkár Jászi attempted to reconcile these diverse and conflicting discourses. Drawing on secondary literature, statistical data and his own thorough knowledge of the field, he also painted a rather optimistic picture of the growth of the Hungarian population: "Wherever we may then measure the sea of nationalities' life, history, oral tradition, witnesses and statistics everywhere speak about the inexorable progress of the assimilation process in favour of Hungarians. In these circumstances, we need not take seriously for one moment the Cassandric warnings spread by some of our chauvinists in 'patriotic' newspapers about the Slovakisation of Hungarian villages" (Jászi, 1986, p. 183).

The above examples aptly illustrate the efforts to implement the "Hungarian national space" in practice. In this struggle, not only historiography, evoking the glorious past, but, according to Róbert Keményfi, ethnography, geography, statistics and cartography also provided politics with arguments which could legitimise the "idea

of the unified space of the Hungarian nation and state" (Keményfi, 2006, p. 3). The process of consciously constructing the Hungarian national space became increasingly noticeable, in which statistics and maps also fulfilled a political role, while "one's own ethnic space" "*became an important part of national mythology*: an inalienable part of national existence" (ibid., pp 18, 20; Emphasis in the original).

Indeed, the multi-ethnic Kingdom of Hungary became more and more Hungarian during the decades of Dualism (1867–1918), at least as far as appearances were concerned. The large-scale celebrations of the millennium of the Hungarian conquest were also intended to immortalise the glory of the "state-forming Hungarian nation", that is, the status quo favourable to Hungarians. This was also attested by the millennium monuments raised at this time in several carefully selected locations throughout the country.[16] One function of the monuments erected in Hungarian–nationalities contact zones and decorated with Hungarian national symbols (coats of arms, Turul birds, Árpád-era warriors, etc.) was precisely to spectacularly mark the "Hungarian national space". As historian Kálmán Thaly, who proposed selected sites for these statues, remarked in connection with the monument to be erected in Zimony (Zemun, today: Serbia), "There it stands proudly in front of the Serbs on the territory of Croatian-Slavons territory to represent the Hungarian state doctrine for them in that place. … The Zimony [monument] is meant for the Serbs who live in the protective embrace of the Hungarian state, but also for Serbs abroad: let them remember, only to the Sava – but not beyond!" (ibid., p 41).

Monuments associated with Hungary springing up in towns in the countryside and the symbolic practices organised around them served similar purposes, as did the coats of arms and flags displayed on public institutions, the Hungarisation of place names at the turn of the century (Berecz, 2020), and even the use of the Hungarian language by the Hungarian State Railways. The symbols of the Hungarian nation and state – and increasingly of the *nation state* – shrouded what was in reality a much more colourful country in red, white and green. Newer generations were brought up in

16 For details, see Varga, 2017.

such political reality. Hungary, surrounded by the ranges of the Carpathians in the north, east and south-east, the Sava in the south, the Adriatic in the south-west and the Austrian Alps in the west, became the natural setting of their lives with its borders unchanged since 1867, and with the 63 counties (and Fiume /Rijeka, today: Croatia/) which had been established by the 1880s after various administration reforms. This situation was also canonized by works like the monumental book series which began to be published in 1896, the *Magyarország vármegyéi és városai. Magyarország monográfiája – A magyar korona országai történetének, földrajzi, képzőművészeti, néprajzi, hadügyi és természeti viszonyainak, közművelődési és közgazdasági állapotának enciklopédiája* [Counties and Cities of Hungary. The Monography of Hungary: An Encyclopaedia of the History, Geography, Arts, Ethnography, Military and Natural Conditions, Cultural and Economic Situation of the Hungarian Crown].[17]

The various aspirations of the nationalities mentioned above may have seemed like unrealistic utopias in the face of the Hungarian nation state at the height of its power, covering the entire Carpathian Basin. Yet until the end of World War I so did the national and irredentist concepts emerging in the neighbouring countries. Nevertheless, these also contributed to the exacerbation of conflicts between the Hungarians and the ethnic minorities at the time of Dualism. The intellectuals active in Serbia, which was gradually shedding the domination of the Ottoman Empire, had the long-term ambition of uniting the entire South Slavic population under Serbian leadership. The Romanian principalities also worked feverishly to realize the Romanian national ideal, with the participation of Romanian intellectuals resettling from Transylvania. After the unification of Wallachia and Moldavia and the creation of Romania, acquiring Transylvania became the main goal of the Romanian nationalists who dreamed of the creation of Romanian national unity, which they justified on the ground of the Romanian majority, the theory of Daco–Roman continuity, and the 1599 conquest of Michael the

17 However, the monumental work edited by Samu Borovszky and published by the National Monograph Society, which presented both the rich history and diverse present of Hungary, remained unfinished due to the outbreak of World War I.

Brave. Romanian national poet Mihai Eminescu claimed he was able to hear the complaints of Romanians from the Dniester to the Tisza, while maps published in the second half of the 19th century already depicted the rebirth of the former Roman province of Dacia in the modern age. This *Romanian* Dacia imagined between the Tisza and the Lower Danube, Maramureș and the Black Sea also included a considerable part of the territory of Hungary.[18] The Czech national movement, like the Hungarian one, also made use of historical arguments to support the constitutional unity of the countries belonging to the crown of Saint Wenceslaus (Czechia, Moravia, and Silesia), and this was later complemented by the concept of Czechoslovakia (Hudek, Kopeček, Mervart, 2019). This concept, which also included the Slovakian nation, proposed the annexation of the Northern Hungarian regions inhabited by Slovaks to the historical Czech state. The contradiction between historical and national principles – as there was a significant German and somewhat smaller Polish population living on the territory of the Czech Kingdom – also appeared in the arguments of the Czechoslovakian delegation at the Paris Peace Conference held after World War I.

The deadlock between the the interested (and opposing) parties in the early 20th century was only broken by World War I and the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. The fast-paced changes unfolding at the end of 1918 and the beginning of 1919 and later sanctioned by the peace treaties around Paris radically transformed the national spaces in the region.

The collapse of the "Hungarian national space"

Yet it was not clear until the last year of the war, and even later, until mid-1918, that the state framework threatened by the different national movements of the Monarchy would in fact soon cease to exist. While support for the demands of the nationalities became increasingly evident – first in the Fourteen Points of American president Woodrow Wilson (Glant, 2009, pp. 84–99), then in the more and more specific promises of the Entente Powers – Hungarian

18 See e.g. Borsi-Kálmán, 1995, pp. 9–66, and Cieger, 2017, pp. 313–314.

politicians continued to rigidly oppose any changes that would affect the territorial unity of Hungary. The letter which István Apáthy, an influential Hungarian politician from Transylvania, wrote to the then leader of the opposition, Mihály Károlyi, in mid-October 1918, about two weeks after the Bulgarian armistice (and two weeks before the dissolution of the Monarchy), is notable. In his letter, Apáthy stated – representing the stance of several other Hungarian politicians from Translyvania – that "at the [future] peace negotiations the representatives of Hungary must under no circumstances agree to sacrificing the internal unity of a free Hungary, much less to the mutilation of Hungary's territory"; Croatia may be ceded, but – if possible – "we must reclaim the three Slovenian [meaning Slavonian] counties which are home to more than 100,000 Hungarian-speaking and almost 150,000 German-speaking Hungarian citizens … We must certainly demand international guarantees for Fiume as our seaport." The author also made himself known as uncompromising with respect to Czech(oslovakian) and Romanian territorial demands and attempts at federalization: "It is of course out of the question to cede counties to the Czechs or to Romania. Nor can we agree to partition Hungary into self-governing territories or transform it into a confederacy of independent states. Yet this is precisely the federalisation that Socialists keep talking about" (Litván, 1978, p. 244).

Thus it is not surprising that both the government coalition led by Mihály Károlyi, which came into power after the Aster Revolution of 31 October 1918,[19] and the Hungarian public were actually shocked by the increasingly determined and radical demands and declarations of the national movements in Hungary. Although several negotiations with the leaders of the Romanian and Slovak nationalities were held in the autumn and winter, they all ended in failure. The main reason for this was that the new Budapest government continued to insist on the territorial integrity of the country – or at least on any modifications to the borders to be decided by the Peace Conference – while national movements were already envisioning the future of their communities outside Hungary.

19 Mihály Károlyi's government coalition was formed by opposition nationalist, radical liberal and Social Democratic forces.

This is well illustrated, for example, by the Slovak assembly in Turócszentmárton (Martin, today in Slovakia) on 30 October and the Romanian one in Gyulafehérvár (Alba Iulia, today in Romania) on 1 December, both of which unilaterally declared the secession of Hungarian Slovaks and Romanians, and their accession to Czechoslovakia and Romania, respectively. The Hungarian government made several attempts to salvage the historical framework of the state: it tried to solve the ethnic question by granting widespread autonomies or by a "Swiss-type cantonisation" of the country – for example by establishing autonomous regions in Subcarpathia (Transcarpathia, today in Ukraine) and in Upper Hungary (today Slovakia) – but these belated measures were only able to demonstrate a break with the old ethnic policies. All the more so because the Budapest government – in the name of pacifism – evacuated the ethnic regions more or less without resistance, and thus the majority of these had come under foreign rule by early 1919. The desperate attempts of local Hungarian elites– from Pozsony (Bratislava, today in Slovakia) to the cities of Transylvania and the Zipser region, to Szeklerland, the Banat and Western Hungary – to achieve the national self-determination of Hungarians also proved futile (Balogh, 2020. pp, 143, 188; Szeghy-Gayer, Zahorán, 2022).

It was even more consequential that at the end of 1918 and the beginning of 1919 the parties concerned failed to agree not only on the integrity of Hungary, but also on "fair national division" (Szarka, 1990, pp. 49–65). The Hungarian–Romanian and Hungarian–Slovakian negotiations at the end of 1918 relatively quickly revealed the irreconcilable differences between their territorial concepts. The leaders of the Romanian national movement – in accordance with the 1916 agreement between the Kingdom of Romania and the Entente – laid claim to about 26 counties of Eastern Hungary inhabited (among others) by Romanians, while disregarding the right to self-determination of the significant non-Romanian population in the area. The Hungarian government delegation was confronted with the intransigence of the Romanian party in Arad, as the latter rejected the preservation of the Hungarian state framework and a temporary division of the region on an ethnic basis. Following this, the Romanian demands were enforced by local Romanian

national councils and military troops arriving from Romania, and later largely approved by the peace conference. In comparison, the negotiations with the Slovak leaders in Budapest after the Martin Declaration may at first have suggested that there were greater chances of a compromise between Hungarians and Slovaks. The demarcation line of the so-called Bartha–Hodža agreement largely followed the Hungarian–Slovak linguistic border; however, this was considered unacceptable by the Czechoslovakian leadership. Czech and Slovak émigré politicians lobbying in Paris for the creation of a strong and great Czechoslovakia wanted to push the borders far south of the compact Slovak region in Upper Hungary, which they partially succeeded to do in the end, although not without a struggle. The predicament of the Budapest administration was made even more difficult – in addition to the general economic, social and political crisis – by its international isolation, as the great powers negotiating in Paris did not recognise any Hungarian government until the late autumn of 1919.[20]

While in reality the "Hungarian national space" controlled by Budapest was crumbling at lightning speed, Hungarian elites and the Hungarian public were slow to realize that the "thousand-year-old borders" of the country they considered their own were impossible to maintain. Not only the local Hungarian initiatives and protests in ethnic regions, but also the disputes within the government indicated that the proposals of the new Hungarian government proved unacceptable to many Hungarians as well. It was left-wing leaders who first recognized that the territorial integrity of Hungary was a thing of the past – which in fact meant accepting the new situation – nevertheless, they also continued to insist on keeping ethnically Hungarian regions. In late 1918 and early 1919 several Hungarian politicians suggested applying the "ethnographic principle," albeit public discourse was still dominated by insistence on the historical territory of the country (Romsics, 2005, pp. 92–93).

However, the Czechoslovakian and Romanian advances had made the situation of the already unstable Budapest government completely untenable by the spring of 1919. The new demarcation

20 For details, see Ormos, 2020.

lines cutting ever deeper into Hungarian territories and the steps taken by the Czechoslovakian, Yugoslav and Romanian authorities foreshadowed the future state borders, which the Hungarian government could not accept, thus it resigned. The Communist–Social Democratic government which subsequently came to power proclaimed the dictatorship of the proletariat, and while making it clear that it would not insist on territorial integrity (ibid., p. 124), it tried to defend the remaining territory of the country with arms, and to spread the Communist revolution. This attempt was finally put to an end by the Romanian intervention in the summer of 1919.

Representatives of individual countries put forward their concepts about their own "national spaces" to the victorious powers at the Paris Peace Conference, which opened in January 1919. The confrontation of competing ideas, however, became rather one-sided, as the losers did not have much say in what would happen, and due to the episode of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, the Hungarian delegation was only invited to attend at the end of 1919. During the settlement, which had by that time been finalised, the great powers primarily promoted their own geopolitical and economic interests and the claims of their allies – Romania, Czechoslovakia and the South Slavic state – at the expense of Hungary in almost every instance (what is more, even the demands of Austria, another defeated party, were taken into consideration).

The delegates of the neighbouring states justified their demands with sometimes contradictory economic and strategic arguments, historical explanations interpreted in their own way, and creative use of census data (Simon, 2019). They also took advantage of the current anti-Communist moods (Gerő, n.d., p. 130), which became especially important with respect to the rail network at that particular moment in history. Foreign Minister Edvard Beneš, who headed the Czechoslovakian delegation, went back in time as far as the Hungarian conquest and 9th-century Greater Moravia to provide historical legitimacy for Czechoslovak claims, and confronted questions of Hungarian statehood and the identity of Slovaks in Hungary with the construction of the Czechoslovakian nation. He also emphasized the subsequent forced Hungarisation and oppression, while questioning the Hungarian census data and underestimating the

number of Hungarians who would be annexed to Czechoslovakia, and exaggerating the number of Slovaks remaining in Hungary (Zeidler, 2003, pp. 50–51). Beneš argued that "In all, 650,000 Hungarians would become subjects of the new state, whereas 450,000 Czecho-Slovaks would remain in Hungary." In Subscarpathia, "the Ruthenes do not wish to remain under Hungarian control … It would be unjust to leave them at the mercy of the Hungarians" (ibid., p. 51). (It is worth comparing these figures with later censuses, according to which in 1930, after about 100,000–150,000 Hungarians had left the territories annexed by Czechoslovakia by the early 1920s, the total number of Hungarians living in Czechoslovakia was about 680,000, while in Hungary the number of Slovak speakers did not reach 105,000) (Kárník, pp. 170 and 236; Száray, 2020; Gyáni, Kövér, 2006, p. 213).

The Romanian demands[21] were similarly justified by a memorandum of the Romanian peace delegation (Zeidler, 2003, pp. 52–58) and by Romanian prime minister Ion I. C. Brătianu, who presented them (Gerő, n.d. *Fateful decisions…* pp. 127–131). Invoking not only the 1916 agreement, but also the disputed theory of Daco–Roman synthesis and continuity and the indigenousness of Romanians, the Romanian party asked the Peace Conference to recognise the expression of the Romanian people's will, that is, the accession of Romanians in Hungary to Romania (Zeidler, 2003, p. 56). While Romania did not wish to acquire Debrecen and the western swath of the Tisza-region because – according to the Romanian document – the long Hungarian rule had disrupted the "Romanian historical and geographical territory," in Transylvania "Hungarians in general do not form a coherent population. They live mainly in towns, scattered among Romanians, and the majority consist of classes that often change their place of residence, mainly officials" (ibid., p. 55). Brătianu, who also accused the Hungarian statistics of inaccuracy (the memorandum uses the word "fanciful"), estimated the number of Romanians in Transylvania at 2,900,000 compared to 687,000 Hungarians, arbitrarily distinguishing the latter from the ca. 450,000 Hungarians in Szeklerland (Gerő, n.d. *Fateful decisions…* p. 128) (according to the memorandum, "a race related

21 On this topic see Balogh, 2020.

to the Hungarians"). (Again, it is worth consulting the data of the 1930 census, according to which there were 1,555,000 native Hungarian speakers/1,425,000 ethnic Hungarians living in Romania after about 200,000–220,000 Hungarians had left Transylvania by the early 1920s) (Andreescu, 2005, p. 43; Száray, 2020).

By the time the Hungarian peace delegation arriving in Paris at the beginning of 1920 received the terms of peace, the victorious powers had long settled the question of Hungary's borders – taking the above into account – and already regarded this question an integral part of the new Central–Eastern European order. The Hungarian delegates, who were equipped with serious professional materials after feverish but thorough work on drafting the peace agreement, were taken aback not only by the terms – they were more or less aware of the future borders – but also by the fact that there was practically no question of negotiation, and the most they could hope for was that the Hungarian arguments would be heard (Romsics, 2005, p. 153). Nevertheless, the Hungarian position was presented in detail in several memos, and later the head of the peace delegation, Albert Apponyi, was able to present it in person at the peace conference. The central motif of the Hungarian arguments was the "thousand-year-old" historical and "organic" geographical, economic and cultural unity of Hungary, the disruption of which could not be justified by linguistic differences. Of course, the manifold Hungarian argumentation was highly ethnocentric and tendentious as well: for example, it denied the oppression of the nationalities in Hungary, and did not recognise the legitimacy of the assemblies that proclaimed their secession (ibid., pp. 150–151; Zeidler, 2003, pp. 110–120).[22] However, beyond the fundamental tenet of integrity, a reference to the Wilsonian principle of self-determination also appeared in Apponyi's speech when he requested a referendum in the territories to be annexed: "this is the principal request we must present to the Peace Conference. If the arguments we are able to bring forward in favour of our former territory, of historical Hungary, should not appear reasonable in your eyes, or not sufficiently conclusive, we would suggest consulting the interested people themselves.

22 On the Hungarian arguments, see also Szarka, 1998, pp. 348–352.

We are ready in advance to submit to their verdict" (Romsics, 2005, pp. 155–156; Zeidler, 2003, p. 124).

However, apart from some hesitation, neither the Hungarian notes nor the spectacular ethnic map ("carte rouge") made by Pál Teleki and his colleagues, nor Apponyi's arguments were able to convince the representatives of the great powers to change the new borders of Hungary.[23] The Treaty of Trianon annexed more than two-thirds of the territory of the historic state and more than half of its population – including every third Hungarian – to the neighbouring countries, thus internationally sanctioning the radical shrinking of the state framework of the "Hungarian national space".

Alternatives to the integrity of the "Hungarian national space" in 1920 and after Trianon

The establishment of the new borders of Hungary essentially embodied the Czech–Slovak, Romanian and Yugoslav national objectives, even if not fully in all places. During the debates on individual border sections, proposals more favourable to Hungary were occasionally made – primarily by the British and the Americans, and sometimes by the Italians – but even these would put the new Hungarian borders far inside the "imagined Hungarian national space" (Romsics, 2005, pp. 95–117). For instance, in the material of the experts from the United States of America, supposedly the most objective because it was not directly concerned, the territory of the new Hungary would have been 112 000 sq. km, with over 9 million inhabitants (after the Treaty of Trianon, the territory of Hungary was reduced to ca. 93 000 sq. km, with 7.9 million inhabitants), and "only" more than two million Hungarians would have become the subjects of neighbouring states (Glant, 2020, p. 232). However, there were much less favourable proposals as well, and in the event of their implementation, the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary would have shrunk to 62 000 sq. km, while its population to 5.4 million (Zeidler, 2020, p. 753). Although France backed the demands of the neighbouring countries in nearly every instance, the Trianon decision – according

23 On ethnic maps see Segyevy, 2021.

to Miklós Zeidler's assessment – could ultimatelly be regarded as a kind of "compromise" between the national principle and the maximum claims of the neighbours (ibid., p. 754).

Although at the time concluding the peace treaty the "Hungarian national space" was still virtually intact on the mental map of Hungarian elites and the Hungarian public, it had already started to shift due to the changed circumstances. This was true not only of the Hungarians who for various reasons fled or resettled from the annexed territories, but also of those politicians who continued to insist on the integrity of Hungary in Paris or in the Hungarian Parliament, as well as in the press and in other public forums. This is aptly illustrated – besides the request for a referendum – by the secret Hungarian–French negotiations which commenced in the months preceding the signing of the peace treaty, and continued even after that. After learning the terms of peace, the Hungarian party would now have made concessions regarding the "thousand-year--old borders", and concretised its territorial claims, in exchange for which it would have allowed the French geopolitical and economic influence to gain more ground in Hungary (Ormos,1975).

The Hungarian vision outlined in the spring of 1920 envisaged the re-annexation of the Hungarian-populated areas along Hungary's new borders; it called for a referendum in the case of Germans and requested regional autonomy and the guarantee of minority rights for those living in more distant regions, such as the Szeklers and the Saxons. The sketch map drawn up during the negotiations showed, on the one hand, the swath of territory definitely reclaimed – i.e. regarded as Hungarian – with a population of ca. 1.7 million, and on the other hand, the regions treated as "bargaining chips" – such as Eastern Slovakia, Subcarpathia or the German region of the Banat – which Budapest would even have relinquished (ibid., pp. 910 and 916). In the end, however, no agreement was reached, and Hungary could make very limited use of the opportunity of minor adjustments mentioned in the cover letter to the peace treaty during the process of establishing the borders.[24]

24 For more on this topic see Suba, 2021, pp. 217–231.

Thus the interests of raw power and the national "sacro egoismo" prevailed in the end, but the Hungarian elites and the Hungarian public did not not come to terms with the new situation (Zeidler, 2001, pp. 160–161). Acceptance of "Trianon" would have been a difficult and lengthy process even if it had not been so unjust and unfair to Hungarians. No wonder, since important sites and landscapes of Hungarian history and culture have been taken over by foreign "nation states". Pozsony (Bratislava – Czechoslovakia), the former coronation city of Hungary, Kassa (Košice – Czechoslovakia), the important regional centre, Kolozsvár (Cluj – Romania), the "capital" of Transylvania, Fiume (Rijeka – Yugoslavia), Hungary's sea port, the Transylvanian Szekler and Saxon regions (Romania), Banat (Yugoslavia and Romania), the Carpathians (Czechoslovakia and Romania), etc., were all considered to be integral parts of the "Hungarian national space". However, some of Trianon's consequences and the Hungarian discontent could probably have been mitigated either by compromises between Hungarians and their neighbours, or by a consistent application of the ethnic principle – which, according to Miklós Zeidler's calculations, would have resulted in a Hungary of ca. 120 000 sq. km, with a population of about 10 million (Zeidler, 2020, pp. 753–754), or by the acceptance of the Hungarian proposal presented during the secret Hungarian–French negotiations. This is true even if each of these solutions would have confined the "Hungarian national space" within much narrower political boundaries than what the majority of Hungarians would have considered acceptable in 1920.

Although the signing of the Treaty of Trianon brought closure to the issue of Hungarian borders, and Budapest also had to refrain from revisionist propaganda for a while, Hungarian frustrations were kept alive by the Czechoslovakian, Yugoslavian and Romanian nationalising policies, as well as by the grievances of the Hungarian communities living in the annexed territories.[25] Thus, as soon as a change occurred in international circumstances, the Hungarian government raised the question of revising the terms of peace with increasing openness. Numerous Hungarian ideas on the desirable

25 For details see Bárdi, Fedinec, Szarka, 2008.

adjustments to Hungary's borders were put forward in the 1920s and 1930s (Zeidler, 2001, pp. 125–158). While the Hungarian ruling elite advocated the necessity of an integral revision – that is, a complete restoration of the "imagined Hungarian national space", although in practice they could prove flexible –, the left-wing opposition and the emigrants were in favour of ethnic revision, accepting the reduction of the "Hungarian national space". Yet another type of compromise was proposed by those intellectuals who urged reconciliation and close cooperation between the region's nations, thus essentially reviving the post-1848 plans for a confederation (ibid., pp. 126–128). The trauma of the peace treaty was also reflected in Hungarian academic and artistic life. An entire series of artistic creations – literary works, public monuments, etc. – betrayed the pain caused by the "dismemberment of historical Hungary,"[26] while the scholarly-ideological justification of the natural unity of former Hungary also persisted (Gyurgyák, Kosztolányi, 2020). The goal was to sustain the "Hungarian national space," which, in a cultural sense, partially survived Trianon, through a long-term prospect of revision.

However, the neighbouring states would not hear of revision. For them, Trianon brought national liberation, which they also signalled by removing symbols regarded as Hungarian: besides Hungarian coats of arms, these included e.g. millennium monuments and other statues. This symbolised the consolidation of their own "national space". With the passage of time, the internationally sanctioned "national spaces" marked by new state borders became fixed and "organic" in Czechoslovakia, Greater Romania and Yugoslavia, and the local majority population and its elites became more and more closely attached to them. The operating mechanisms of nation states also contributed to these processes – similarly to Hungarian nation-building before 1918, but with the roles reversed. As a result, Hungarian minorities in Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Romania became increasingly foreign elements in the states of the "Czechoslovaks", "Yugoslavs" and Romanians, in spite of the fact that they were native to the land they lived in.

26 Gyurgyák, Kosztolányi, 2020.

Hungary's neighbours perceived the changes made to the borders between 1938 and 1941 with the help of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy as national disasters and a "mutilation" of their own "national spaces" (similarly to the way Hungarians regarded the partitioning of historical Hungary twenty years earlier). Their frustrations, grievances and the fact that the revision was again the result of interventions by great powers (the two Vienna Awards) and armed actions (the occupation of Subcarpathia and the Vojvodina-region), while direct Hungarian–Slovakian and Hungarian–Romanian negotiations failed one after the other, made it again impossible to fairly separate the national spaces of Hungarians and their neighbours (Bárdi, Fedinec, Szarka, 2008, pp. 138–145). After World War II, the Trianon borders were essentially restored, and Hungary renounced definitively the political unification of the "Hungarian national space": at most it could continue to provide cultural support to the Hungarian minorities.[27] However, ethnic Hungarian minorities had to face further, even harsher measures in the region newly dominated by the power hegemony and worldview of the Soviet Union.

The majority of the post-1945 Hungarian grievances were only remedied after the fall of the state socialist dictatorships, as part of the Euro–Atlantic integration process. Even though the situation of Hungarian minorities has certainly improved considerably, it is still far from being settled in many respects, which keeps the "trauma of Trianon" alive. However, it is still possible to observe some Romanian, Slovakian, etc. ambitions in relation to the culturally redefined "Hungarian national space" which first emerged after 1918, and which aim to eliminate or at least minimise the Hungarian aspects of the regions formerly belonging to Hungary. These include an arbitrary reinterpretation of the past, and the neglect or appropriation of the Hungarian cultural heritage, in which the sometimes restrained, sometimes more forceful nationalising policies of the neighbouring countries have virtually free rein. Hungarian minorities and Hungary itself can counteract these phenomena only to a limited extent: for example by supporting Hungarian communities and autonomist movements, by extending Hungarian citizenship,

27 See István Bibó's thoughts on the Paris Peace Treaties of 1947.

or by strengthening symbolic practices (ibid.).[28] At present, the "Hungarian national space" in fact means Hungary and – virtually – Hungarian communities living in neighbouring countries, as well as – albeit less and less so – Hungarian "cultural heritage", i.e. the sites linked to Hungarian history and culture.

As Róbert Keményfi points out in his work cited above, "the 'myth of the ethnic space' has become an important part of the nationalism resurgent in Central-Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, which triggers and strengthens nationalism itself. ... nationalism means nothing else but the struggle for the spatial realisation of symbolic ethnic boundaries." (Keményfi, 2006, pp. 24–25). The issue of Trianon, which also involves the theme of the "Hungarian national space", doubtlessly forms part of this struggle. This is because in the countries neighbouring Hungary "Trianon" was and still is used to legitimate the borders sanctioned by the peace treaty signed in 1920 (and reaffirmed after World War II) and the nationalising policies of the successor states. According to several Romanian and Slovakian politicians and historians, Hungary got in Trianon what it in fact deserved for the national oppression before 1918, and the new state borders confined the "Hungarian national space" to the territory that effectively belonged to Hungarians. Accordingly, they tend to understate the importance of linguistic boundaries, continue to set their own censuses against the Hungarian ones they dispute, relativise the minority politics of their countries after Trianon, etc.[29] At the same time, an increasing number of historians attempt to break with national bias, either by seeking more objective answers to the questions surrounding Trianon, or by choosing a different approach to escape the trap of national narratives.[30] The Hungarian historical discourse is similarly diverse: historians working with recycled elements of the pre-1945 national narrative and defending the "Hungarian truth" compete with the authors of

28 On Transylvania see e.g. Patakfalvi-Czirják, 2021, pp. 90–94, and Zahorán, 2016, pp. 226–281.

29 See e.g. Holec, 2010, pp. 291–312; Gábor, Vrábel, 2020; Pop, 2019; Pușcaș, Sava, 2020; and Drăgulin, 2021.

30 Michela, Vörös et al., 2013; Ficeri, 2019; Holec, 2020; Boia, 2017.

more nuanced and balanced works.[31] Which tendency will prove to be dominant will also impact the future of the interpretation of "imagined national spaces".

Conclusion

In the present paper, I have attempted to show how the Hungarian and neighbouring "imagined national spaces" emerged and came into conflict. The pre-1918 rivalry of the Hungarian, Slovakian, Romanian, etc. representations of national spaces, which had solidified in the second half of the 19th century, as well as the change in power relations at the end of World War I and the subsequent developments of the 20th century all demonstrate that the region's national elites as a whole stubbornly held on to what they had attained through transitory positions of power, and were unable to reconcile their results through compromise, even if this meant that they themselves suffered grave losses in the long run. Correspondingly, they interpret any encroachment on their own "imagined national space" as an offence ("dictate"), which leads to rejection and enduring frustration. This is especially true of Hungary, the greatest loser in the Central and Eastern European region after World War I.

Yet the peace conference following the war (could have) provided a unique opportunity for the peoples of the region to come to an agreement and for the victorious great powers acting as arbitrators to enforce the principle of self-determination of peoples which they so solemnly embraced, and, through its consistent application, by drawing (more) just borders, to strive to achieve a (more) lasting settlement between the small nations of the region.

What can be done, then, if border revision is not only unfeasible, but also pointless (as it certainly is within the EU)? On the one hand, we may trust in time, i.e. in a gradual cooling of the memory burdened by cultural trauma. Of course, this is a slow and rather "passive" solution, as evidenced by the fact that the present essay discusses

31 For examples of the former, see e.g. the works of Raffay, Popély or Schmidt; while examples of the latter include, besides the already cited writings by Romsics, Szarka, Zeidler, Egry, Simon, Balogh and others, e.g. Bárdi, 2013; Feischmidt, 2014; Hatos, 2018, Révész, 2019; and Ablonczy, 2020.

the consequences of World War I, which came to an end more than a hundred years ago. More tangible results could be achieved by making Central European borders even more "ethereal", supporting cross-border projects, joint actions by Hungarian political actors working in Hungary and in neighbouring countries, deepening the cooperation between the neighbours, complemented by an objective discussion of problems and a continuing dialogue between Hungary and its neighbours. Of course, this also requires further improvement in the situation of Hungarian minorities.

However trite and clichéd it may sound, it is the European Union which currently provides the best framework for this goal. The weakening of the nation-state structures also reduces the exclusivity of individual "national spaces", which makes it easier for them to complement each other rather than overlap. In other words, even the old, seemingly naïve visions of Central European or Danubian reconciliation and alliance may come true in the end. Even if this scenario does not seem too realistic in light of the conflicts of interests and power games existing within the EU and of the continuing instrumentalisation of nationalism, it may still be a suitable objective.

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