



VISUALIZATIONS

Trianon: self-defeating self-determination

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At the end of 1918, multinational Hungary was among the losers of the First World War. It did not follow from this that the victors needed to impose on her a century ago in the Trianon treaty the extremely harsh measures they did, especially in a territorial sense. Nor did it follow from the events of the period between the end of the war and the concluding of the treaty. The plans, including secret treaties (Szarka 2008a) were ready beforehand.

Hungary had been part of Western civilization by then for over nine centuries, sharing its values, including the most defining one, the principle of self-determination. The latter's content had widened through the ages, and by about this time was widely acknowledged to also apply to ethnic groups. For Hungarians the least tolerable aspect of the treaty to absorb was the contradiction of its measures to this western value.

The inconsistency of those dictating the terms is conspicuous not just in the Trianon treaty itself, but its comparison with treaties concluded with other states on the losing side. This was manifested not just in the frequent superseding of the principle of self-determination when it came to masses of the Hungarian population despite quoting it when rationalizing the detaching from the country her minority inhabited areas, but also in the selective application of plebiscite as in the context ideal means for exercising democratic will.

It was an odd application of the principle of self-determination that considered necessary to dismember Hungary that – disregarding autonomous Croatia-Slavonia which was choosing to secede – had a Hungarian majority of 54.5% (Kogutowicz 1927) so as to transfer to Czechoslovakia a territory where the proportion of the Slovaks was 47.7% and another to Romania where the proportion of Romanians was 53.8% (Kogutowicz 1927). This, while the state forming position of the Slovaks in the new Czechoslovakia – the very justification for transferring land they inhabited to Czechoslovakia – was at least not without ambiguity; and as to Romanians, amounting in total to 16.1% (Bárdi 2008) of the population of hitherto Hungary securing self-determination for – not even all of – them involved the transfer to Romania a larger territory than allowed by the treaty to be retained by Hungarians who were forming 54.5% of the inhabitants of the partitioned country.

Simultaneously the state named then Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia) came to possess two such areas of Hungary where even the combined total of all Southern Slavonic population (Serbian, Croat, Slovene, Šokac and Bunievac) was merely 30.9% (Kogutowicz 1927) according to the 1910 census. The state forming position of the non-Serbians in this area (just as in joining to this new state Croatia-Slavonia) remained in various ways mere fiction (Figure 1).

Delegating over 3.3 million people, i.e. one third of all Hungarians into a minority position contradicted unequivocally the principle of self-determination. Their number was substantially higher than that of either the seceding Romanians or of the Slovaks, not to mention that of the Southern Slavs which was amounting to a mere one-seventh of this figure. Besides, the concept of self-determination was not served by the fact that there was as a result of the redrawing of the frontiers an about two and a half million strong population transferred from a minority position in Hungary to the same position in the successor states. Being moved to another state meant no improvement for them from the standpoint of self-determination. It meant instead a major upheaval affecting them only detrimentally, given the series of ways in disrupting their way of life hitherto. Thus even if assuming that the Slovaks, Romanians, Southern Slavs and the western Transdanubian (Burgenland) Germans all desired to secede – and there were tangible signs to the contrary – the treaty brought improvement even then to the position of only about 5.2 million people, at most. It achieved that at the price of worsening simultaneously the position of about 5.5 million other people. Viewing this from a general Western standpoint, it was hardly worthwhile to bring about such 'gain' by destroying a traditional unit that was functioning for 900 years as one of the pillars of the state system of the West. The collapsing of this pillar contributed to destabilizing that system, thus affecting the West as a whole detrimentally.

The principle of self-determination having been in the case of the Trianon treaty a mere catchphrase is unmistakably clear from the victors not wishing even to hear about plebiscites to be held – although suggested by the Hungarian delegation (Szarka 2008b) – in the territories assigned to be detached concerning their fate. They were pointing instead to decisions of national assemblies of dubious legitimacy, convened together in haste, uncertain if reflecting democratically the collective will of the various minorities. What more, they have done so without taking in account the decisions of those such assemblies that decided for remaining in Hungary.

This was inconsistent further by comparison with the other post-war treaties. Whilst it is customary to the level of amounting to a cliché to refer disapprovingly to the extreme harshness of the Versailles treaty to Germany – and not without reason – its conditions, especially concerning territory were almost incomparably milder and certainly much fairer than those of the Trianon treaty to Hungary. Minor linguistic islands and Alsace-Lorraine (the German-speaking inhabitants of which were traditionally of a pro-French sentiment) apart, that treaty not only did not detach German speaking areas from Germany but allowed in the main the minority populations of various areas to decide by plebiscite if they wished to secede. The Polish speaking Masurian (and some other) parts of Germany decided for remaining in Germany. It was thus apparent that it did not necessarily follow from the linguistic conditions of the population where they wanted to live; economic considerations and conservatism could prove to be more decisive than the attraction of their 'mother nation'. This could well have been the case in at least some minority inhabited areas of Hungary if people were not denied the chance to decide.

Austria, it is true, was deprived of significant German-speaking territories, but at least in her mainly Slovenian inhabited southern Carinthia a plebiscite was held – the result deciding for Austria. Also, Austria was compensated to some extent for her losses – by receiving Hungarian land. Bulgaria lost in the main – and only partially – territory she had gained a mere six years earlier. Compared to the losses of Hungary, both the size and proportion of this was negligible. The Ottoman Empire, whilst having to give up its Arabian possessions (also Germany's colonies were taken), there was little intention to detach Turkish-speaking area from her even in the Sèvres treaty, which was annulled due to the Turkish resistance to it. That treaty even foresaw a plebiscite for a sizeable Kurdish-inhabited land.

There was much traumatized, thus unhelpful soul searching among Hungarians for an explanation as to what had led to the wholesale disregarding of a core Western principle by leading Western powers that, adversaries or not, had been highly respected. There was much misguided effort to internalize the explanation. It is nonetheless unwarranted to seek it in the Hungarian treatment of minorities. Despite a prevailing 'bad press' to the opposite – advanced by the victors and a desire to rationalize a deeply unjust deed – it was, if compared under proper scrutiny against contemporaneous European standards, in fact exemplary, or at the very least in no way worse than that of any other state of the period. Indeed, the very victors were never referring to any retaliatory intent in the treaty terms. There is no reason to seek an explanation in other than a benevolent indifference of the Entente powers towards the excessively covetous craving of Hungary's neighbours – their erstwhile allies – for unrestrained expansion, combined with an as short-sighted as it was unprincipled expectation for the latter's services to come in the future.

It does shed an unfavourable light on the victorious powers that the sole plebiscite in Hungary that was allowed to be held – not before concluding the Trianon treaty – about the fate of Sopron, took place not out of a respect to the

right of self-determination, but in view (Baumgartner 2008): of armed resistance in western Transdanubia.

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