

## **The Hungarian Society and the Europe. Political and Cultural Aspects (1920-1940)**

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**Abstract:** The disappearance of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the dissolution of the Kingdom of Hungary led to profound changes in the Hungarian collective mentality and influenced decisively the specific of the foreign policy, orchestrated by the various governments of the country, in the interwar period.

**Keywords:** Hungary; Trianon; Treaty; World War I; Europe; revisionism

The 1920-Trianon moment appears to be still one of the painful obsessions of the Hungarian society, at least the level of a significant part of its intellectual elite.

A great deal was written about this event, in various registers: historiographical, literary, political, propagandistic, journalistic. Historians, geographers, politicians from Hungary and elsewhere have devoted special attention to the Treaty of Trianon. Our intention is not necessarily to return on some relatively well known factual elements, but to attempt an analysis of how the Hungarian society has felt the effects of the Peace Treaty of Trianon in time, at its different various component levels. Obviously, we do not claim to be exhaustive (it would be absurd) but rather to suggest possible themes for possible future discussions.

The statistics agree in terms of loss territory and population suffered by the Kingdom of Hungary in 1920. According to the census of 1910, in an area of 325,411 km<sup>2</sup>, the historic Hungary had a population of 20,886,487 inhabitants, and a decade later, a new census indicated a population of 7,980,143 inhabitants. (Alix, 1924, pp. 84-85)

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However the surface of the new state was now of 92,916 km<sup>2</sup>, while the prevalence of the Hungarian ethnic element was remarkable: 89,6%. (Alix, 1924, pp. 84-85)

Although the Hungarian delegation in Paris tried to impress the assistance with the appeal to the historical right, respectively the alleged geographical unity of the Hungarian Kingdom within the Dual Monarchy, the attempt failed.

The principle of nationalities was the fundamental element that actually governed the talks and the reaction of the Hungarian delegation in denying its applicability in the case of the countries under St. Stephen's Crown is an example of a sophism embroidered on a supposed ethno-geographical basis: "*Applying the principle of nationalities could not be applied to the Kingdom of Hungary, as there are no compact masses of other nationalities which are not mixed with Hungarians and where Hungarians do not play an important role*". (Meitani, 1943, pp. 228)

The Hungarian proposal to use a plebiscite in those regions that should be detached from the configuration of the kingdom, was neither successful. On the other hand, it is hard to believe that if such referenda took place, the results would have been those desired by the authorities in Budapest. (Meitani, 1943, p. 229)

The only territory to which the Hungarian officials raised no claim was Croatia, perhaps also because the province had already enjoyed a broad autonomy during the previous period.

Between 1867 and 1918, the political-intellectual elite of Hungary adopted a very active image policy and used a system of connections, which no once, generated positive perceptions at international level. The public opinion in the West believed for a while in some of the themes that formed the sketch of dualistic Hungary, even though those themes were proposed by the officials in Budapest. Firstly, it promoted the image of a parliamentary state, possessing (except Great Britain's Parliament) the oldest parliamentary system in Europe, with a dense yet advanced legislation, the orchestrator of an effective administration and a flexible financial system. (Eisenmann, 1920, pp. 321-333)

Some aspects did not just belong to the sphere of propaganda and we refer here to the railway network- the sixth in Europe in terms of density, or to the generous subsidies offered by the state for agricultural development and to the food industry. Finally, although it continued to represent a relatively painful point in the overall economic assembly, the industry registered an undeniable progress. (Berend, 2001, p. 19)

A more attentive observer would have been disgusted by the persistence of electoral corruption and the demagoguery represented by the claim of equality between the nations and confessions existing between the boundaries of historical Hungary. (Macartney, 1956, p. 209; Mann, 2004, p. 242; Molnar, 2008, p. 253; Langsam, 1943, p. 114; Horthy, 2000, p. 135)

World War I was the end of a historical period which many imagined as eternal and the effects of Trianon - a true, collective shock, difficult to emotionally quantify. (Molnar, 2008, p. 262)

As many as 3,425,000 Hungarians were separated from Hungary after 1920, but we refer to that almost mythical Hungary of St. Stephen, the country where the Hungarians were (paradoxically) a minority, but they thought it could be homogenized through successive political-linguistic steps. (Molnar, 2008, p. 262)

The principle of nationalities became the standard of the new times, the reference point in international relations and one even talked about the application of an almost divine justice. The peoples who had formed the ethnic mosaic of the Austro-Hungarian Empire had given then a deadly blow to the ancient state body.

There was nothing to be done anymore. The confusion of the public opinion in Hungary was complete.

In this memoirs, Mikos Horthy grants a few lines to Trianon and laments the consequences of what he (and many other Hungarians) called (after 1920), the “*diktat*” imposed by the victorious Great Powers in the First World War, to the Hungarian nation. (Horthy, 2000, p. 135)

It is the cry of rebellion and helplessness of a whole generation of public actors, unable to give up the clichés, prejudices and stereotypes that have marked their education. Through constant and obsessive propagation, this originally diffuse feeling, then becoming more and more acute and bitter, will be taken on by a large part of the Hungarian public opinion and will become the reference point for the ulterior actions of Hungary after 1920.

Some details of how the Great Powers decided to redesign the map of Europe generate controversy even today. H. Seton-Watson did not hesitate to write that, in substance, the new states emerged after 1920- namely Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, have not applied the wisest policy towards the national minorities between their borders, showing (despite their official

statements) the tendency to become the states of a single nation, able to assimilate minorities on long term. (Berend, 2001, p. 187)

The League of Nations offered sufficient legal instruments through which minorities in new states would benefit from protection against any tendency of discrimination, but the real tendency, tacitly encouraged, could be summarized in the phrase “*a fair and gradual assimilation*”. (Berend, 2001, p. 187)

Moreover, minorities were to be prepared for the ultimate goal pursued by the officials of the states resulting from the dissolution of Austria-Hungary, namely, that of assimilation within the new national communities. (Berend, 2001, p. 187)

This was said at a certain point even by Aristide Briand, in an apparent play on words, that could not be seen at all with equanimity by the Hungarian politicians. (Berend, 2001, p. 187)

It can be said, therefore, that the minorities existing within the states of the Europe generated by the system of the Peace Treaties in Paris (1919-1920), were satisfied with the receiving of the citizenship rights, but they kept throughout the entire interwar period an anxiety about their possible assimilation within the majority's mass.

The Post-Trianon Hungarian society will experience an ambivalent attitude which has oscillated throughout the entire interwar period, between the acute sense of deception and the nostalgia for recovering the symbols of past glory. Many Hungarians felt betrayed by what they came to call “*the perfidious, hypocritical and duplicitous West*”, convinced that in reality, the self-determination principle was not applied in a balanced manner everywhere: those nations were favored that had effectively supported the Entente, between 1914-1918. (Bideleux & Jeffries, 2007, p. 323)

Even after 1919, the social category of nobility maintained its political influence in Hungary, due to the implementation of an agrarian reform with minimal results. (Mann, 2004, p. 238)

Perhaps this sociological aspect could also explain the specific of the collective feeling of the post-Trianon deception, its intensity, its nuances- and then, the actual typology of the interwar Hungarian nationalism. The old imaginary representation built around the Turul Bird, the riders emerged from the steppes of Asia, the typical Hungarian integrating spiritual concept (known as “*Delibab*”)- all these will be found in the physiognomy of the revisionist nationalism born out of the belief that,

at Trianon, Hungary was unjustly crucified, and the proud Hungarian people was treated with absolute cruelty. (Mann, 2004, p. 238)

The Hungarian heroic tradition assigns a special place to the episodes of the fights of the Hungarians against the Turks and later with the Austrian imperialists. In older evocations, the figures of the eminent kings identify not only once with those of mythical heroes. After 1920, the Hungarian nationalism will get more acute accents of a liberating theology. Once lost the shining of the military glory and the symbolism of the imperial power, the Hungarian collective imaginary had to reorganize itself, as a natural effect of the new political context. The themes of freedom, the injustice of history, the Hungarians collective loneliness, will become prevailing in attitudes, speeches and political projects. (Mann, 2004, pp. 241-242)

Gradually, against the background of seemingly insurmountable economic difficulties generated by the new international context, the autochthonous model will be discovered, represented by the universe of the village, seen as a cradle of national purity, the last bastion against the alleged threat represented by the corrupt and decadent modernity. (Berend, 2001, p. 82)

A writer such as Deszo Szabo is representative of such thinking, likewise a historian of Gyula Szekfu's value, who will try to sensitize the Hungarian society, to what he considered to be the equal danger posed by the aggressive liberal capitalism and the opaque West to the specific Hungarian national soul. In one of his books, Szekfu concluded that, in fact, the deterioration of the post-Trianon Hungarian society would have its seeds in the nineteenth century, in the alienation of the Hungarian middle class. (Berend, 2001, pp. 82-83)

The Hungarian revisionism intellectuals could not all come to terms with the fact that such an important number of their countrymen remained outside the borders of Hungary and could not in any way overcome the feeling of futility that they were dominated by.

Some of the artistic creations of the interwar period could represent to this effect, examples of converting the sadness, the undefined feeling of abandonment, the long almost sterile dreaming. Even when we think of the famous song "Sad Sunday" composed in 1933 by Rezo Seress, a song about which a lot has been written and which through its echoes of heartbreaking melancholy, became a kind of seal of those who decide to end their life. Did post-Trianon Hungary become a country of suicidal people? No way, but individual tragedies did exist and

sometimes their explanation could be found in the general atmosphere of the Hungarian society, often bleak, ambiguous, tense.

The appeal to the traditional values as a response to the chaotic assault of the modernism of Western extraction is also visible in Bela Bartok's musical creation, who is a spirit of broad intellectual openness and who has not hesitated to popularize the folk creations of other nations, including the Romanian people.

Bartok was a tireless seeker of folklore, his infallible taste being a guarantee of value. In the traditional Hungarian music, he equally saw the symbol of the collective soul of his people, in what it had more pure and authentic, and also a form of regeneration of a prevailing collective mentality, which he considered subdued by the burden of the stereotypes of the West. The ecstatic rhythms, the sadness of a wild, unbelievable beauty, seemed to arise from the mysterious feeling of the ancestors. (Berend, 2001, pp. 82-83)

A great example of a poet lacking chauvinistic-revisionist fixations, of a definitely universal talent was Jozsef Attila, probably the most spectacular lyrical voice of interwar Hungary. He committed suicide at the age of 32 years (in 1937) and became a true myth, especially among a certain part of the youth. With leftwing sympathies, Jozsef Attila managed to express in his work, the entire tension, feverishness, passion and sadness of the era, without falling at all into the trap of the clichés and obsolete pathetic character. It was an echo of that collective soul, which demanded urgent rediscovery, but unlike the village atmosphere, Jozsef Attila focused particularly on the urban landscape, no less tortured by the nostalgias of a glorious past, which became then only a sum of memories.

When Jozsef Attila expressed in those years through verse, being somehow emblematic of the mentality of those living in towns, Gyula Illyes expressed in prose, and his novel *The People of the Steppe* (1934) was an impressive radiography of the life of poor peasants, who became almost archetypal for Hungary's image. Illyes's novel fits the broad cycle of literary and scientific works called "sociographic", typical to the 1930s, which aimed at rediscovering the apparently forgotten specific character to Hungary, an initiative in which some have decrypted the same desire to overcome the contextual national impasse and a guarantee for a most urgent collective revival, the first covered phase however having to be a spiritual one. Crossing the desert would be difficult, but hopes were high because they were fueled by frustration and ambition. As with other

communities hit by the cataclysm of history, hope also came out of the fundamental myths which had molded the nation's soul. (Berend, 2001, p. 361)

On the other hand, the economic difficulties and the status of defeated country will actually influence the foreign policy of Hungary, after the country initially knew the experiment of the Soviet Republic. Miklos Horthy's regime could be defined in his early years as semi-authoritarian, and since 1930, it acquired the characteristics of a radical right-wing regime. (Mann, 2004, p. 242)

However, the paradoxes of the Hungarian society did not stop here. Before 1918, the kingdom of Hungary was recognized as one of the most tolerant towards the Jewish minority, especially the nineteenth century, which was called by the Jews in Hungary the "Golden Age". (Mann, 2004, p. 238)

In 1920, however, Admiral Miklos Horthy's regime decided to introduce the first legislative measures with anti-Semitic character in postwar Europe and we refer here to the setting of a rate of 6% for the Hebrew ethnics that could study in the universities in Hungary. (Mann, 2004, p. 241)

Later, the political-diplomatic closeness between Hungary, Germany and Italy seemed almost inexorable, in the outlining international context. (Macartney, 1956, pp. 225-227)

An interesting aspect was the regime's mechanism of revisionist propaganda, directed towards the areas of international influence. Many newspapers and magazines have been published in Hungary, in international languages.

In 1923, "The Hungarian Narion"- a publication coordinated by Dr. Krisztics Sandor appeared; "Pesti Hirlap" published a newspaper in four languages ("Danubian News", "Nouvelles danubiennes", "Corriere del Danubio", "Donaukurier"), edited by the Revisionist League. (Calafeteanu, 1993, p. 37)

In 1920, the League of National Defense released "La Transylvanie enchainee" (Transylvania in Chains); in 1928, the Society for Foreign Policy published in five languages the work entitled "Justice for Hungary", and the examples in this regard could continue. (Calafeteanu, 1993, p. 37)

At the same time, an active role in disseminating the Hungarian revisionist propaganda abroad was played by the Union of the Hungarian Abroad, created in the early 1920s. In August 1929, the first Congress of the Union, held in Budapest, was attended by 365 delegates, representing 172 Hungarian societies worldwide.

The press organ of the Union was a magazine with sporadic issues- "Kulfoldi Magyarorsag" (The Hungarians abroad). After the outbreak of World War II, the Union ceased its activity. (Calafeteanu, 1993, p. 37)

A note from 1963 of Nichifor Crainic (Romanian interwar theologian and journalist) referring to the Hungarian revisionist propaganda in Italy stated:

*"In Italy, not only the newspapers, but also the magazines were bought by the revisionist Budapest. The beautiful and rich Hungarian countesses had opened elegant salons in Rome, Florence and the main Italian centers where they received politicians, journalists and scholars, offering even their favors in the interest of revisionism. In the night clubs of the West, the Hungarian dancers appeared on stage in traditional national costumes, and they were instructed to make propaganda for Transylvania at private parties".* (Calafeteanu, 1993, p. 38)

Since 1927, the Hungarian revisionist propaganda abroad was focused and guided by the Revisionist League. Between 1927 and 1940 the League published 238 books, magazines, newspapers, and leaflets having propagandistic character, in German, Italian, French, English, Spanish, Finnish, Portuguese and Hungarian. (Calafeteanu, 1993, pp. 40-41)

At the same time, the Revisionist League established secretariats in several foreign capitals, having the task of observing the public life, the press, organizing conferences through which the "Hungarians aspirations" would be popularized. In Germany, these secretaries were supported by figures such as Simons (Chairman of the Supreme Court of the Reich), V. Fumetti (State Magister of Saxony), General Walter, Miller Brandenburg and Alexis Mirovsky (writers) as well as the Stahleim organization, within which pro-Hungarian revisionist groups were created.

In Italy, the first secretariat was established in Milan, then a second in Roma. The secretariats in Italy were strongly supported by the association "Amicii dell Ungheria" (Friends of Hungary), which invited to Italy many politicians, scientists and people of culture from Hungary (among them Teleki Pal, Istvan Betheln, Tibor Eckhardt, Peter Gyula, Poka-Pivny Bela, Jehlicska Ferenc and others) who held numerous conferences with revisionist character, whose main target was Romania. For example, it was shown that after the First World War, Germany had only lost 13% of its territory and 10% of the population, in contrast with Hungary, which lost 72% of the surface and 66% of the population. (Calafeteanu, 1993, p. 41)



In the context of the post-Trianon period, the Hungarian-Romanian relations were a tragic example of what the clash of vanities, frustrations, historical representations, legal-emotional arguments meant.

The reference element of this seemingly irreconcilable opposition was Transylvania. (Gillet, 1997, pp. 457-485)

The French historian Catherine Durandin observed, in an analysis of the Romanian-Hungarian relations, that these could be judged from the perspective of the historical so-called "long-duration" and by relating them to the intervention of the various power centers, representing major European countries or international bodies, hegemonic in different international contexts. (Durandin, 1996, pp. 385-395)

The Hasburg Empire, the League of Nations, the Axis Powers or the USSR could be mentioned in this regard. After 1919, the public opinion in Hungary perceived France as being the particularly strong supporter of Romania's interests, while the Romanian officials would become, at a certain point, increasingly wary of the alleged even closer links (in the eyes of Bucharest) between Washington and Budapest. All amid the challenge by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson of the policy of the French major state and of Prime Minister of France, Georges Clemenceau-confident (as well as the men of arms in France) in the capacity of the Romanian army to annihilate by itself, the Hungarian Communist troops of Bela Kun. (Durandin, 1996, pp. 385-395)

Neither could the event of the conquest of Budapest by the Romanian armies (after the campaign of 1919-1920), leave a bright memory in the subconscious of the Hungarians. A renowned specialist in the history of Hungary- C.A. Macartney, claimed that during the period of Romanian presence in Hungary, a large part of the country's stock would have been undertaken by the Romanian troops, while in Budapest, the excesses and robberies committed by some of the Romanian soldiers, were quite serious. (Macartney, 1956, p. 210)

The writer Antal Kalmar wrote in a passionate manner: "*The hatred between the Hungarians and the Romanians is a racial hatred which cannot be suppressed by a good administration or by economic and social institutions*". (Dragomir, 1934, p. 33)

Referring to the unification of Transylvania with Romania in 1918 and the effect of this event on the public opinion in Hungary, Pierre Rain noticed:

*“On the Eastern border, the sacrifice that was imposed to Hungary through the removal of Transylvania was painful, but legitimate”* (Rain, 1945, p. 114)

The 1,704,000 Hungarians ethnics, who belonged to Romania, as an effect of the Trianon Treaty, were always presented by the Horthy regime propaganda, as brothers temporarily separated from the rest of the Magyars. (Molnar, 2008, p. 262)

However, the Romanian statistics claimed that in 1920, Transylvania’s population was of 5,114,124 inhabitants, out of which 2,930,120 were Romanians, 1,305,753-Hungarians and 539,418 Germans. (Codarcea, 1937, p. 90)

On December 28th, 1922, the National Hungarian Party of Romania was established. Its program was dominated by the idea that the Hungarian nation was a body of public law, within the Romanian state, invoking in this respect the Paris Convention of December 9th, 1919 concerning national minorities.

The National Hungarian Party of Romania militated for the right of the Hungarians in Romania to have their own administration and justice, carried out by Hungarian officials, religious autonomy and school autonomy- but all supported by subsidies from the Romanian state, from its budget. (Dragomir, 1934, p. 272)

Finally the program stipulated autonomy at the level of villages and departments and the reorganizations of army based on the principle of militias, with a three-month military service and instruction for the recruits in Hungarian. A passage from the Transylvanian Hungarian National Party program is meaningful:

*“Before anything, maintaining national unity and its uninterrupted continuity until their formal expression will be possible in public law”*. (Dragomir, 1934, p. 272)

The idea in this passage might be an explanation for a series of gestures of the old and new Hungarian policy, the historian Silviu Dragomir noticing that *“its equivocal wording, wakes up in the bosom of the minorities tendencies which cannot be reconciled with the idea of Romanian state, to which they belong”*. (Dragomir, 1934, p. 272)

The achievement of the ideas suggested by its contents, and even some of the points of the program of the National Hungarian Party in Transylvania, prefigured the actual dismantling of the Romanian state. In fact, the first “commandment” of the Hungarian Irredentist Decalogue states: *“Never forget that you are the son of the Hungarian nation, humiliated and dishonored. Even at night when you wake*

*up, recall that millions of your brothers suffer under the horrible and brutal yoke of some perfidious bandits". (Dragomir, 1934, p. 272)*

In the period 1920-1922, the Horthy regime directly or tacitly approved many aggressive plans against neighboring countries. The Post-Trianon Hungarian governments had in mind, for a certain period, the possibility of recovering at least some small portions of the borders of St. Stephen's Hungary. (Calafeteanu, 1993, p. 49)

Admiral Miklos Horthy's regime wanted to be one of the reconstruction of the so-called "historical Hungary", and the closeness to the Axis powers was justified by this imperative, which the politico-military elite from Budapest and the vast majority of public opinion in Hungary considered sacred. In 1940, Horthy enjoyed immense popularity among the Hungarians, which could be explained by the country attaching (with the decisive help of Nazi Germany) part of the territories lost in 1920, due to the provisions of the Trianon Treaty.

The cinematographic journals of the time significantly show the atmosphere in Hungary and, beyond the propagandistic dimension of the official events, it is obvious the note of feverishness emerged from a frustration that painfully ulcerated a part of the collective mentality.

These echoes of Trianon in Hungary have not been permanently extinguished even today.

In some movies and writings, we decrypt the bitterness of that period, dark, nostalgic scenarios filled with pathos are still being embroidered, the national mythology is still referred to, and the mythic faces of the exemplary heroes are offered as examples for people today, in an almost religious sense, as elements of an unrepeatable history, full of light and grandeur.

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