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“Magna Hungaria” and “the Treaty of Trianon” in the Hungarian politics of memory: an outline of the issue

“Magna Hungaria” and “the Treaty of Trianon” are two of several fundamental terms featured in the Hungarian politics of memory. Owing to a strong position they occupy in the cultural memory of Hungarians, they are a flexible substance for Fidesz and Viktor Orbán to base their actions upon and subordinate these to their present political objectives. These encompass e.g. the legitimization of the governing party, and regional politics.

The film by László Nemes titled *Napszállta (Sunset)* premiered in Poland on 5 April 2019. The action of the film takes place in 1913. A young milliner, Irisz Leiter (Juli Jakab) arrives in Budapest with the hopes of discovering family history associated with a millinery bearing her surname. The significance of the work by the Hungarian director goes beyond the movie’s plot. Nemes himself frequently argued that the film pertains to the twilight of the civilization and contains references to the present day. Set in historical reality, the film became the starting point in the discussion regarding Hungarian cultural memory and how the 1867-1914 period, the “golden age”, functions in the memory. The period concludes with WWI and the Treaty of Trianon, universally referred to as a “national tragedy”. Even though not directly, the film discusses this particular issue.

Magna Hungaria in the cultural memory and politics of memory in Hungary. In the pre-WWI period, Hungary was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Budapest was booming and could go head to head with Vienna. Ever since the 1867 Austro-Hungarian agreement, the position of Hungary in the Habsburg Empire grew steadily. Despite the fact that the Austro-Hungarian period was a *de facto* time when Hungary surrendered its independence – or at least a part of it – the period is reminisced with an idealized nostalgia. This is acknowledged in the way the image of Franz Joseph (remembered as a congenial old man loved by the people) is maintained in the cultural memory of Hungarians (and not only them).

The period between 1867 and 1914 is remembered by Hungarians as the time of development and progress, as Nagy-Magyarország, i.e. Magna Hungaria (Great Hungary). The term is also used at present. It is employed by irredentist movements postulating the return to the pre-WWI shape of the Hungarian boundary. It also emerges in Fidesz political discourse, especially in the statements of Viktor Orbán, who has been systematically attempting to rekindle the myth of Magna Hungaria, e.g. during the annual visit to Băile Tuşnad (Hun. Tuszánfűrdő), a spa town in Romanian Transylvania. This serves the regional politics and supports Hungarian minorities in Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine.

The Magna Hungaria myth László Nemes deals with is popular not only in the Hungarian politics of memory, but also functions in Hungarian collective consciousness. The map of the pre-1920 Hungarian territory is a universally known and recognized symbol in Hungary. It is featured not only on post stamps but also on bumper stickers and t-shirts.

The Treaty of Trianon in the Hungarian politics of memory. Hungarian “golden age” was interrupted by WWI and the provisions of the Treaty of Trianon, remembered in Hungarian cultural politics as a “national tragedy”. As a consequence of the treaty, the territory of Magna Hungaria was divided among five countries: Romania, Czechoslovakia, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, Austria, and Poland. This resulted in the decrease of the Hungarian population from 21 to 8 million. Estimates vary, but approx. 2-3.5 million people of Hungarian nationality found themselves outside the Hungarian boundary. The date of the treaty, 4 June 1920, became a national day of mourning. On that day, national flags flew at half-staff, and remained so until 1938. Schools prayed for the return to the pre-Trianon state of affairs. Simultaneously with these symbolic gestures, the Hungarian parliament passed laws applying to e.g. Transylvania. The revision of the Trianon provisions became the main objective of Hungarian politics in the interwar period.

At present, the governing party continues the tradition of depicting Trianon as a national trauma, as one of the greatest tragedies which befell the Hungarian nation in the 20th century, and as a source of suffering of the nation, including the part of it which landed outside the state's borders. This final element is currently a reference point for actions to the benefit of the Hungarian diaspora. Trianon is also featured in a more general narration present in the Hungarian politics of memory – the narration concerning a nation experiencing the yoke of external oppression.

The fact that the attitude of Fidesz towards Trianon evolved over time is noteworthy. In 1990, when György Szabad, the chairman of the National Assembly of Hungary, turned to delegates to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the treaty, members of Fidesz walked out of the chamber to express their opposition. This proves that Fidesz uses historical issues instrumentally and subordinates these to its political agenda.

Such an approach supplies the Hungarian government with symbolic arguments in regional foreign politics. This is valid for e.g. the Act on Hungarian Nationality. On 26 May 2010, the Hungarian parliament adopted the act allowing Hungarians residing abroad permanently to apply for Hungarian citizenship in a simplified procedure. The regulations came into force on 1 January 2011. The Trianon narration, systematically used in the Fidesz political discourse, offered historical legitimization for the introduction of the law.

Trianon in the symbolic space of Budapest. In order to consolidate the position of the Treaty of Trianon in Hungarian cultural politics, the event was commemorated symbolically on the map of Budapest. In June 2008, Trianon Memorial Park was opened in the southern part of the capital city. The park commemorates the territory lost in the aftermath of the treaty of June 1920. The central position in the park is occupied by a bell which strikes daily at 16:32 – the time when the document was signed.

On the other hand, on 11 April 2019, The Steindl Imre Program company introduced the project for the Memorial of National Unity (*Nemzeti összetartozás emlékhelye*). The memorial commemorates the Treaty of Trianon. The monument will be situated at Alkotmány Street, next to the building of the Hungarian parliament. According to the authors of the project, it will not constitute a monument but a site of national memory, and will simultaneously offer a functional transformation of space: a 100-meter long, 4-meter wide ramp dipping from Kossuth Square to Alkotmány Street. Both sides of the ramp will be inscribed with 12 thousand names of historical locations. The locations will include the names of places separated from the homeland as a result of the treaty, and those remaining within the Hungarian boundary – this is to symbolize the unity of the nation. The memorial will be topped with a granite block containing an eternal flame. The project will be unveiled in 2020, on 4 June, to commemorate the centennial of the treaty. The day was also established as the Day of National Unity by the Hungarian parliament in 2010.

The symbolism of the memorial and its location – the ramp, inclining towards the building of the Hungarian parliament – are a perfect embodiment of the fundamental premises of Fidesz's present politics of memory. First of all, the historical suffering of the Hungarian nation is supposed to constitute a modern source of revival. Secondly, the Hungarian nation experienced oppression brought about by other countries. The grievance will be compensated thanks to the present ruling elite.

Conclusions. Magna Hungaria and the “tragedy in Trianon” constitute significant elements of Viktor Orbán's party's political discourse. The two terms are rooted in Hungarian cultural memory and symbolic space. They are flexible and susceptible to manipulation – the events are attractive for the public (on the one hand, the compelling “golden age”, Hungarian *belle époque*, and on the other hand, national trauma) but cannot be verified by the tales of the living witnesses to these events. The politics of memory pursued by Fidesz by means of these terms has several fundamental objectives. Primarily, it legitimizes Fidesz and its actions historically, especially in terms of the regional politics and provisions pertaining to the situation of Hungarian minorities in East-Central Europe. Slightly less directly, it exerts an impact upon the anti-immigration politics of Viktor Orbán by diverting attention to the condition of Hungarian diaspora. In addition, it brings to memory the injustice experienced by the Hungarian nation brought about by other countries, as well as the memory associated with external threats. As a consequence, it is well within the “martial rhetoric” employed by Viktor Orbán.

Trans. Tomasz Kuras