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# The greatest catastrophe of (post-)colonial Central Europe? The 100<sup>th</sup> years anniversary of Trianon and official politics of memory in Hungary

**Największa katastrofa (post-)kolonialnej Europy Środkowej?  
100. rocznica Trianon i oficjalna polityka pamięci na Węgrzech**

**Abstract:** The Treaty of Trianon (hereinafter Trianon), the enormous losses of territory and co-ethnics, and the shaking of Hungary's status as a dominant power in the Carpathian Basin imputed a tragic understanding of contemporary Hungarian history on the Hungarian society, invoking the idea of a trauma lasting even today. Trianon's understanding became a divisive issue for political parties after 1989, highlighting the ever-deeper divisions between right and left-liberals, since 2010. Its "overcoming" is a flagship project of the government's politics of identity, with modest success so far. Thus, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary was a crucial moment as a test case for a self-professed nationalist, traditionalist, conservative political force for manifesting a comprehensive politics of memory. In the light of the newly built monument at the heart of Budapest, with the Hungarian names of all localities on the territory of pre-1918 Hungary inscribed on its wall, a cautious shifting back to territorial revisionism was expected.

In this article, I will argue that even with such tendencies being, obviously, present, the official commemorations were crafted with a surprising message, that attempts to turn the canonical understanding of Trianon upside down and reframe it into a common catastrophe of Central Europe. Doing so places the consequences in the context of the decolonization of history, the present decline of empires, and the emergence of nation-states while combining it with important tropes of the traditional, anti-liberal and revisionist Trianon discourse. Nevertheless, the result is a transparently political message that is not only driven by easily visible actual political goals (V4 and Central European cooperation), but one that detaches the politics of memory from historical

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references and legacies and creates a set of shallow symbols for utter instrumentalization, to recombine at will, in a vulgarised sense of post-modernism.

**Keywords:** Trianon, Hungary, Central Europe, politics of memory, post-colonialism

**Streszczenie:** Traktat z Trianon (zwany dalej Trianon), a także jego skutki w postaci ogromnych strat terytorialnych i etnicznych oraz utraty przez Węgry statusu dominującej potęgi w Kotlinie Karpackiej spowodowały, że węgierskie społeczeństwo postrzega także dziś historię państwa jako tragiczną, można mówić nawet o jego traumie z tego powodu. Po 1989 r. rozumienie Trianon zaczęło dzielić partie polityczne, a od 2010 r. uwydatniać coraz głębsze podziały między prawicą a lewicowymi liberałami. „Przezwyciężenie” Trianon to sztandarowy projekt rządowej polityki pamięci, pozostający w dużej mierze bez sukcesów. Z tego powodu 100. rocznica Trianon była momentem przełomowym, testem dla samozwańczej nacjonalistycznej, tradycjonalistycznej, konserwatywnej siły politycznej w zakresie manifestowania wszechstronnej polityki pamięci. W związku z nowo wybudowanym pomnikiem w sercu Budapesztu, na którym widnieją węgierskie nazwy wszystkich miejscowości z terytorium Węgier sprzed 1918 r., spodziewano się ostrożnego powrotu do rewizjonizmu terytorialnego.

W niniejszym artykule postaram się wykazać, że obok takich oczywistych tendencji, oficjalne obchody miały zaskakujący przekaz, który próbuje całkowicie zmienić kanoniczne rozumienie Trianon i przekształcić je w postrzeganie tego wydarzenia jako powszechnej katastrofy Europy Środkowej. Umieszcza to konsekwencje Trianon w kontekście historii dekolonizacji, obecnego upadku imperiów i powstawania państw narodowych, a także łączy się z ważnymi tropami tradycyjnego, antyliberalnego i rewizjonistycznego dyskursu o Trianon. Niemniej jednak rezultatem tych działań jest przejrzyści przekaz polityczny, który nie tylko jest napędzany dobrze widocznymi, aktualnymi celami politycznymi (współpraca V4 i Europy Środkowej), ale także oddziela politykę pamięci od historycznych odniesień i spuścizny oraz tworzy zestaw płytkich symboli dla całkowitej instrumentalizacji przeszłości, które dowolnie i ponownie łączą się ze sobą, w myśl uproszczonego rozumienia postmodernizmu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Trianon, Węgry, Europa Środkowa, polityka pamięci, postkolonializm

## Introduction

Since the construction of a new monument dedicated to “National Cohesion” (Hun. *Nemzeti Összetartozás*) has started opposite to the main entrance of Hungary’s Parliament building, in the centre of Budapest, it was obvious that the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Treaty of Trianon would not pass without large scale official celebration. The monument itself was controversial – a ramp leading underground to an eternal flame and all the Hungarian official names of localities on the territory of pre-1918 Hungary engraved in the dark granite stones. In the case of places detached in 1920, the monument displays the version used in the last official cadastre of names, published in 1913. The list was the result of 15 years of Magyarization, which led to the rebaptism of about 1/3 of places’ names with the intention to disgui-

se their non-Hungarian origins – an attempt made even more absurd by the fact that often their inhabitants were predominantly or even exclusively non-Hungarians. A hotly contested issue at that time was the Magyarization of geographic names which was understood both by its supporters and opponents as a means of nationalist politics to create a homogeneous nation-state out of the multi-ethnic Hungarian Kingdom<sup>1</sup>.

Critics of the new monument pointed out that embracing the Hungarian nationalism's legacy is a controversial message; downplays the responsibility for the emergence of centrifugal forces before 1918 and contradicts the wish, which often expressed, to understand the perspective of non-Hungarian national histories<sup>2</sup>. The monument was easy to take as a precursor of the coming commemoration, in the atmosphere of the ever-stronger nationalist political discourse that emphasises national sovereignty, at least one detail finally corroborated those views. Before the monument was unveiled on August 20, 2020 the surrounding photo exhibition erected on 20<sup>th</sup> July was changed from displaying bilingual place names to exclusively Hungarian ones in about 36 hours. But the preparations lasted longer than expected, funds were allocated for the main official commemorations only at the beginning of March, and the Covid-19 crisis finally eliminated almost all the events planned. A few official videos were launched on YouTube by the House of Terror, the director of which was Mária Schmidt who was also appointed as the government commissary responsible for the commemorations. Originally a historian of the Hungarian Holocaust, she became Viktor Orbán's advisor after 1998 and the founder of the House of Terror. Her attention turned

- 1 A. Mező, *A magyar hivatalos helységnévvadász*, Budapest 1982; Á. Berecz, *Empty Signs, Historical Imaginaries: The Entangled Nationalization of Names and Naming in a Late Habsburg Borderland*, New York – London 2020.
- 2 K. Ungváry, *Politikailag és morálisan is védhetetlen üzenetet küld a kormány*, nepszava.hu, 04.06.2020, [https://nepszava.hu/3080312\\_politikailag-es-moralisan-is-vedhetetlen-uzenetet-kuld-a-kormany-interju-ungvary-krisztiannal](https://nepszava.hu/3080312_politikailag-es-moralisan-is-vedhetetlen-uzenetet-kuld-a-kormany-interju-ungvary-krisztiannal) [31.06.2020]; A. Gerő, *Városok helyett magyar családokkal emlékezzün Trianonra!*, 24.hu, 13.04.2019, <https://24.hu/kozelet/2019/04/13/gero-andras-trianon-emlekmu-varos-csalad-nev/> [07.08.2020]; G. Egry, *Végre egy irredenta emlékmű?*, hvg.hu, 18.04.2019, <https://m.hvg.hu/hetilap360/2019/16/20191618velemeney2> [31.07.2020]; I. Mijnsen, *Die Schmach von Trianon: wie ein ungerechter Friede Ungarn und seine Nachbarn seit einem Jahrhundert prägt*, "Neue Zürcher Zeitung", nzz.ch, 03.06.2020, <https://www.nzz.ch/international/vertrag-von-trianon-ungarns-trauma-und-nationaler-mythos-ld.1558309> [31.07.2020].

to broader issues, history of totalitarianism in general, and she became a key figure of politics of memory. This year she organized a few on-line events, articles were published by historians from the House of Terror and Schmidt's circle<sup>3</sup>, and finally, Viktor Orbán held a speech at the site of an irredentist monument from the interwar period in Sátoraljaújhely, on the Hungarian-Slovak border<sup>4</sup>. In the meantime, the parliament held a commemorative session and passed a declaration on the "Defense of National Identity" completing the series of official acts reflecting official views and officially sanctioned historical interpretations of the government<sup>5</sup>.

Overall, the commemorations did not confirm the fears that the anniversary would stoke tensions and reignite the symbolic conflict between Hungary and its neighbours, nor among Hungarian political parties. A downbeat mood was undoubtedly a consequence of the pandemic, and the absence of a cacophony of voices makes it easier to analyse and interpret what emerged as a somewhat surprising official line of commemoration. In the following, I will elaborate on how it is different from the previous politics of memory regarding Trianon, how it is connected with very actual political goals, and how it is related to the broader issues of history and historical traditions – something one would expect to be important for a self-professed conservative government and its ideological activists. Using a few key texts from the last months, I will first outline the established discourse on Trianon on the Hungarian right, subsequently the commemorations' novelties and their significance, and, finally, draw more general conclusions. In this endeavour I will only consider texts that are either official ones (from Viktor Orbán or the Parliament), or those written by a circle of people whose involvement with the official commemoration is obvi-

- 3 On the research director of the House of Terror, Márton Békés see: V. Hopkins, *How Orbán's decade in power changed Hungary*, "Financial Times", 21.05.2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/414f202e-9996-11ea-8b5b-63f7c5c86bef> [31.07.2020].
- 4 Á. Máthé, *Tíz tézis Trianonról*, "Kommentár" 2020/2, [kommentar.hu](http://www.kommentar.info.hu/cikk/2020/2/tiz-tezis-trianonrol), <http://www.kommentar.info.hu/cikk/2020/2/tiz-tezis-trianonrol> [31.07.2020]; M. Békés, *A Trianon-egyenlet feloldása*, [mandiner.hu](http://mandiner.hu), 30.06.2020, [https://mandiner.hu/cikk/20200630\\_a\\_trianon\\_egyenlet\\_feloldasa\\_trianon\\_101](https://mandiner.hu/cikk/20200630_a_trianon_egyenlet_feloldasa_trianon_101) [31.07.2020]; *Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's commemoration speech*, [abouthungary.hu](http://abouthungary.hu), 06.06.2020, <http://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/primeminister-viktor-orbans-commemoration-speech-trianon/> [31.07.2020].
- 5 See: <https://www.parlament.hu/irom41/10760/10760.pdf> [31.07.2020].

ous: they are connected to the House of Terror informally or formally, and whose texts were published in a form asserting this connection.

## 1. Trianon in the House<sup>6</sup>: politics of memory and political divisions since 2010

The first legislative acts of the newly elected Hungarian Parliament, dominated by Fidesz and its 2/3 majority, were the simplified naturalization process for Hungarians living abroad and the assignment of June 4, the anniversary of the Treaty of Trianon to a new memorial day, the so-called Day of National Cohesion/Unity (Hun. *Nemzeti Összetartozás Napja*)<sup>7</sup>. Both pertained to Trianon in a broad sense, and the latter was a typical commemorative law, noting the tragic and traumatic nature of the event, declaring that sustaining national cohesion was a moral duty. Henceforth, June 4 was officially included in the memorial calendar. The local governments, Hungarian communities abroad, and schools used to organise their own events. The date almost automatically made it a commemoration of Trianon, and the modality of public speech acts was selected accordingly: suffering, trauma, and hardly tolerable injustice.

But it was no novelty, only a shift between two rival discourses that emerged within the post-1989 politics as a symbolic representation of right-left (liberal) divisions<sup>8</sup>. With the demise of the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats and the shrinking of the Socialists, Fidesz made a previously contested narrative semi-official. It was rooted both in post-1989 politics of memory and in the interwar discourse around Trianon. Hungary's alleged negligence towards the Hungarian minorities in the Kádár era, and the alarming news from Nicolae Ceaușescu's national-communist Romania in the second half the 1980s significantly accelerated the delegitimisation of the socialist regime. Therefore, the fate of Hungarian minorities was a crucial issue for all

6 G. Romsics, *Trianon a Házban. A Trianon-fogalom megjelenései és funkciói a pártok diskurzusaiban az első három parlamenti ciklus idején (1990-2002)*, [in:] *Az emlékezet konstrukciói*, eds. G. Czoch, Cs. Fedinec, Budapest 2006, p. 35-52.

7 Law XLV from 2010.

8 G. Egrý, *A Fate for a Nation? Concepts of History and the Nation in Hungarian Politics, 1989-2010*, [in:] *Thinking Through Transition. Liberal Democracy, Authoritarian Pasts, and Intellectual History in East Central Europe After 1989*, eds. M. Kopeček, P. Wciślik, Budapest – New York 2015, p. 505-524.

the parties, but the agreement did not entail the assessment of Trianon. Revisionism was resurrected by the radical right and even the more mainstream centre-right political parties considered Trianon, to be a historical event that needed to be dealt with. The Liberals and the Socialists, in contrast, promoted the idea of overcoming Trianon, finally accepting that the Peace Treaty was the past, and practical solution (like linguistic rights, cultural autonomy etc.) for its lingering consequence, the minority status of Hungarians instead of symbolic gestures were necessary, which together with accession to the EU would resolve the problems<sup>9</sup>.

Thus, a more emotional rhetoric clashed with a more rational one, and the former attempted to reinstate Trianon as a traumatic present, an unhealed wound of all Hungarians. The emotional one was practically the same as the main tenet of interwar irredentist propaganda, which asserted that the loss of territory, and of the Hungarian population, was unacceptable, and its reversal, restoration of territorial unity a moral duty<sup>10</sup>. It was also well-suited for the emerging anti-communist and anti-liberal variety of the politics of memory in Eastern Europe<sup>11</sup> that juxtaposed the victimhood of these societies during Communism with the Holocaust-centred normative Western politics of memory, claiming symbolic equality for their own sufferings<sup>12</sup>. In this regard, Trianon was also often likened to the Holocaust as two equally tragic and traumatic catastrophes, or – especially on the extreme right – as equal, but distinctly Jewish and Hungarian traumas<sup>13</sup>. Hungarian victimhood was thus extended not only to the post-WWII period but to

9 G. Egry, *Otthonosság és idegenség. Identitáspolitika és nemzetfelfogás Magyarországon a rendszerváltás óta*, Budapest 2010; G. Romsics, *Towards Negative Possession of Identity*, [in:] *Populism, Memory and Minority Rights: Central and Eastern European Issues in Global Perspective*, ed. A.-M. Biró, Leiden – Boston (MA) 2018, p. 89-129.

10 M. Zeidler, *Ideas on Territorial Revision in Hungary: 1920-1945*, Boulder (CO) 2007.

11 J. Mark, *The Unfinished Revolution. Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central and Eastern Europe*, New Haven – London 2010.

12 Ibidem, p. 215-220; see also: F. Laczó, *Totalitarianism without Perpetrators? Politics of History in the "System of National Cooperation"*, [w:] *Brave New Hungary. Mapping the "System of National Cooperation"*, eds. J. M. Kovács, B. Trencsényi, Lanham (MD) 2019, p. 29-50.

13 É. Kovács, *Trianon, avagy a traumatikus fordulat a magyar történetírásban*, "Korall" 2015, vol. 16, no. 59, p. 82-107; eadem, *Overcoming History through Trauma. The Hungarian Historikerstreit*, "European Review" 2016, vol. 24, no. 4, p. 523-534.

the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century; suffering became the common thread of national history.

With Fidesz's dominance over the state, media, and politics since 2010, this form of official memory gained ground, but it was carefully situated within the broader Central European context. The preamble of the Law on National Cohesion accepted that in the Trianon and its prequel, the history of dualist Hungary had a different meaning for non-Hungarians, and in a muted form, it even referred to political mistakes of the Hungarian governments. The possibility of dialogue and acceptance of different readings of history and the empathic simultaneity of alternative national narratives was implied in such statements. However, subsequent concrete acts were dissonant, like the abandonment of the project of a common Slovak-Hungarian textbook, on the basis of a nationalistic peer-review<sup>14</sup>.

In a general sense, Trianon and the alleged trauma became a cornerstone of state-building too. The emerging "new Hungary" was to remedy both the ills of post-Communism (the failed change of regime)<sup>15</sup> and Trianon, the dissolution of the national state. The scope of state-building was extended to the neighbouring countries, creating a paradox of extraterritorial statehood, and making citizenship the crucial attribute of Hungarian nationhood, i.e., Hungarianness, something that all Hungarians should have access to<sup>16</sup>. It was a remedy for Trianon, although not the solution, which was the overcoming of trauma. It also reinvigorated the Carpathian Basin's image as a Hungarian space, which was re-established through political, institutional, and economic ties, including football, through generous subsidies of football academies in regions inhabited by a Hungarian minority.

However, other important elements of classic Hungarian nationalism were missing, most importantly the assertion of Hungarian superiority and unique state-building capacity – an idea that in the pre-1945 era legitimised the re-establishment of Hungary with the

14 L. Szarka, *A közös történelem nehéz öröksége. Víták nemzet és állam historikumáról*, "REGIO" 2014, vol. 22, no. 1, p. 156-192. The reviewer was László Tókéczki, a kind of court historian, whose review used classic Hungarian nationalist stereotypes, going as far as denying the possibility of a Slovak history before 1918.

15 J. Mark, *The Unfinished Revolution...*

16 G. Egry, *Beyond Electioneering. Minority Hungarians and the Vision of National Unification*, [in:] *Brave New Hungary...*, p. 73-94.

dominance of the Hungarian nation. With time, however, more radical notions appeared within the official discourse, especially that of ethnic purity and its preservation through the rejection of migration. Ethnic purity and the alleged national traditions (mainly anti-liberal ideas) were woven together as the natural, inviolable form of national existence. Hungary was portrayed as a nation under threat and still struggling for its self-assertion, and the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary seemed to offer a convenient opportunity to capitalise on this discourse.

## **2. A commemoration devoid of history?**

The traditional perception of Trianon has revolved around the idea of injustice. Several, often interrelated aspects were, and still are, used discursively, creating a cloud of historical injustice that contributes to the present sense of aggrievement, but which are part of the traditional discourse too. The most significant source of injustice in this regard is the violation of the Hungarians' right to national self-determination by the Great Powers and by the neighbours, including the violation of minority rights, historically extending to ethnic cleansing attempts in the subsequent decades. The cultural loss is also a source of injustice, the fragmentation of national cultural space, the destruction of cultural artefacts etc. Hungarian culture was at least until 1945, often considered superior to most of its neighbours, thus the fact that Hungarians were ruled by allegedly inferior cultures was also taken as a form of injustice. Trianon also meant the disruption of the "natural" national space and national destiny: building a state within the Carpathian Basin. The Magyarization during the dualist era as a legitimate reason for non-Hungarian nationalities to secede is often challenged or denied, and the acceptance of this argument by the Peace Conference is considered to be another injustice. Finally, Trianon was frequently perceived as the result of the machinations of a few internal enemies of the nation such as Jews, Freemasons, and liberals, without whose actions at the end of WWI collapse would not have happened.

These are the typical historical references, and even though not all of them are necessarily simultaneously present in reflections on Trianon, they constitute the solid basis of the rightist discourse. The above-mentioned new monument embraced and justified the Magyarization with the exclusive use of Magyarized place names, while it

visibly reasserted the Carpathian Basin as a Hungarian space, whose loss is the trauma itself and the symbolic re-appropriation of which is the national unity. In a sense, it shifted from the unity of the nation as a community of human individuals, implicit in the Law on National Cohesion, to the unity of the nation through its natural space and territory.

Nevertheless, the commemorations of the anniversary took a surprising turn and went against the monument's message. The video spots<sup>17</sup> created by the House of Terror and commissioned by its owner Közép- és Kelet-európai Történelem és Társadalom Kutatásáért Közalapítvány were impressions, at best, devoid of all historical references. One of them displayed two youths playing football in a village that is suddenly struck by an earthquake and divided by a canyon running right in the middle of and along the main mud road. A family lunch is abruptly cut off and the youths on opposite sides of the divide cannot continue their game. However, decades later, when the road is already asphalted, the now elderly players find each other again and continue playing where they left off. The second spot is a marriage story at Lake Balaton where the guests arrive from cities abroad, such as Marosvásárhely/Târgu Mureş, Szabadka/Subotica, and Párkány/Štúrovo, suggesting tight family and friendship ties across the borders.

It is clear that none of the spots conveys a historically embedded message. The subject is banal, and the story of divided and reunited friends is non-specific and frequent in youth literature. Neither was the ambiance in the clips very specific, abundant with scenes and objects associated with Hungary and Hungarianness. The catastrophe is natural rather than the result of human action and the resolution is accidental. There is no suffering or victimhood displayed, and the division is easy to overcome. The mental map suggested by the home cities of the marriage guests is not the Carpathian Basin, just the border zones between Hungary and Slovakia, Romania, Serbia or in the Székelyland, where there is still a significant presence of a Hungarian minority. Although it reflects Hungarians' current mental map appro-

17 *Megható videókkal segítik az összetartozást Trianon századik évfordulóján*, origo.hu, 18.05.2020, <https://www.origo.hu/kultura/20200518-kisfilmek-a-trianoni-bekeszerzodes-alairasanak-szazadik-evfordulojara.html> [31.07.2020]. Links to the videos are found in the article.

priately<sup>18</sup>, and vague current knowledge of society<sup>19</sup>, it is not surprising that this form of commemoration was criticised from the radical right as a breach of tradition and without any national substance. Therefore, they rejected it as the official line of the commemorations<sup>20</sup>.

The video spots were published before the anniversary and it was clear, especially after Viktor Orbán's comment on the commemorations at the beginning of 2020, that one of the reasons for this lacklustre approach was geopolitical. Since 2018, his third consecutive 2/3 majority, Viktor Orbán has set his eyes beyond Hungary's confines while he plays a significant role at the European level. Helped by his hardliner stance during the 2015 refugee crisis that solidified the unity of the Visegrad 4 countries in this regard, he openly declared his aim of constructing a new core with Central Europe as the centre of the EU<sup>21</sup>. The traditional nationalist discourse on Trianon with its focus on the Hungarian grievances suffered from the neighbours and the unavoidable clash over the meaning of 1918 and 1920 as a Hungarian catastrophe, yet a national liberation for the other nations, was dangerous and potentially detrimental.

However, the official discourse revealed after the publication of the videos did much more than subduing the classic story of national victimhood. Quite the contrary, it aimed at a complete reinterpretation of Trianon in line with the new project of Central European cooperation against the Western centre of the EU and, very pragmatically, it used elements of Western discourses which were critical of mainstream history too. In this effort, however, probably for reassuring those who expected to hear the traditional narrative of victimhood, it offered a sense of security with the use of well-known tropes from the traditional nationalist interpretation, but without weaving them together in the familiar way.

18 M. Feischmidt, *A magyar nacionalizmus autenticitás-diskurzusainak szimbolikus térfoglalása Erdélyben*, [in:] *Erdély-(de)konstrukciók*, ed. M. Feischmidt, Budapest 2005, p. 7-32.

19 *Egy országos közvéleménykutatás eredményei*, trianon100.hu, 01.06.2020, <https://trianon100.hu/cikk/egy-orszagos-kozvelemenykutatas-eredmenyei> [31.07.2020].

20 Z. Babucs, *Száz éve feszítették keresztre, de a magyar él és élni akar!*, felvidek.ma, 04.06.2020, <https://felvidek.ma/2020/06/szaz-eve-feszitettek-keresztre-de-a-magyar-el-es-elni-akar/> [07.08.2020].

21 *Prime Minister Orbán: Within the next few years Central Europe will be the engine of the European economy's growth*, abouthungary.hu, 19.11.2020, <http://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/pm-orban-within-the-next-few-years-central-europe-will-be-the-engine-of-the-european-economy-growth/> [31.07.2020].

Viktor Orbán's speech held on June 6 in Sátoraljaújhely, captured the essence of this approach very well, while a few other texts from the House of Terror and Mária Schmidt's circle were carefully aligned with it, demonstrating the conscious effort to reinterpret Trianon<sup>22</sup>. In practical terms, the key element is a turn from the past towards the future, declaring Trianon to be over and the arrival of a new era of Hungarian greatness. It is very traditional in the sense that the most classic tropes of national history and early revisionist discourse are used and recombined with the core idea of Hungarian state-building capacity and cultural superiority.

Orbán's speech abounds with references to the historicity of the Hungarian statehood from the arrival of Hungarians in the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century to the present. The visual presence of this history and as Orbán said, "the indelible evidence, churches and cathedrals, cities and town squares still stand everywhere today. They proclaim that we, Hungarians are a great, culture-building and state-organizing nation". This is a very clear reference to the Hungarian state-building capacity and cultural superiority. It is, however, not just an abstract statement, nor is it simply the past. It is embedded into the geographic space of the Carpathian Basin which until today constitutes the natural territory of Hungarians and what they defend:

"Hungarians are contracting and expanding like the human heart, but we have been living for a thousand and a hundred years where our great state founders chose our place. We defend the Carpathian Basin with dignity, which is also our mission. Every new Hungarian child is also a new guard post. We do not cut, torment, or sell, but keep the Carpathian Basin"<sup>23</sup>.

It is, furthermore, the destiny of the Hungarians to make the Carpathian Basin great again, a clear application of the idea of territorially bound national destiny. ("We want to make the Carpathian Basin great together with the peoples who live with us.") And if anyone would have had doubts regarding the role of Hungarians among the other nations,

22 *Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's commemoration speech...*; M. Békés, *A Trianon-egyenlet...*; Á. Máthé, *Tíz tétis...*

23 *Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's commemoration speech...*

the speech – like the parliamentary declaration – asserts that Hungarians are still the nation with the largest population in the Carpathian Basin, and the natural gravitational point of the area. Phrases, like

“today we have once again become the most populous country in the Carpathian Basin. We haven’t been this strong in a hundred years. We are building bridges and railways down to Belgrade, and highways up to Kassa. Our political, spiritual, economic and cultural gravitational force is growing day by day”<sup>24</sup>.

suggest predominance, priority, and a position of strength, despite the mention of cooperation.

Other typical tropes of national history in the speech include the idea of the *antemurale Chrtisanitatis*, the guardians of Christianity against Eastern invaders and the Ottomans, a classic element of Eastern European national narratives. The rebellious nature of Hungarians and their love of freedom that finally made them defeat all oppressors, is another. The myth of a stab in the back at the end of WWI (“finally, the thousand-year-old historical Hungary was stabbed in the back by the conspiracies in Budapest”) was borrowed from the early revisionist narratives, that wanted to scapegoat the progressive politics of the time for the failure of the traditional elite<sup>25</sup>. The notion that the peacemakers wished to erase Hungary from the map and eliminate Hungarian statehood is also part of this set of ideas, bordering on conspiracy theories, that often explicitly blame freemasons, liberals and Jews<sup>26</sup>.

There is an attempt to connect this Hungarian story with the broader politics of memory in Central Europe. Two models are used; Orbán’s speech made a simple historical assertion that showed the Sovietization of Central Europe as the continuation or consequence of Trianon:

“And when we thought that neither the arrogant French and British nor the hypocritical American empire could sink deeper than this, they could still do

24 Ibidem.

25 A. Pók, *The Politics of Hatred in the Middle of Europe. Scapegoating in Twentieth Century Hungary. History and Historiography*, Szombathely 2009.

26 See: Á. Máthé, *Tíz tétis... Máthé assesses “noble (liberal) assimilation” during dualism as ineffective, simple eye-washing, and makes “defeatist opposition” and its prominent leaders, together with the press and journalists – who „behaved like loose cannon” – responsible for the defeat, partly absolving from responsibility the military leadership and the traditional elite.*

so. After World War II we were thrown to the Communists without heartache. The reward of the Poles, the Czechs and the Slovaks was the same as our punishment. May this be an eternal lesson for the peoples of Central Europe!<sup>27</sup>

Áron Máthé, a historian, previously a leading researcher at the House of Terror, now member of the Committee of National Remembrance, a government body dedicated to research on the Communist dictatorship, approached this as a matter of politics of memory, maintaining that the common experience of Communist oppression can help to reconcile rival and conflicting national narratives; therefore, Hungarian historians should aim to find a way to construct this common history of suffering<sup>28</sup>. But these approaches are common in their attempt to embed the new interpretation of Trianon in the existing framing of Central European history as distinct from the Western experience and a means of symbolic recognition, through the acceptance of Central Europe's sufferings after its Sovietization, as equal with the Nazi horrors.

However, finally, the new interpretation of Trianon goes beyond this traditional juxtaposing and makes an effort to recast the Hungarian tragedy as the tragedy of Central Europe. Orbán's speech is clear but not elaborated; he uses strong statements that draw an opposition between the imperial West, which is allegedly now in decay because of its imperial past, and the nationalist East, which is – as Orbán asserts – currently on the rise. From this vantage point, Trianon was the “raping” of Central Europe an act that resembled how colonial powers divided peoples and territories at will:

“The West raped the thousand-year-old borders and history of Central Europe. They forced us to live between indefensible borders, deprived us of our natural treasures, separated us from our resources, and made a death row out of our country. Central Europe was redrawn without moral concerns, just as the borders of Africa and the Middle East were redrawn. We will never forget that they did this<sup>29</sup>.”

27 *Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's commemoration speech...*

28 *Á. Máthé, Tíz tézis...*

29 *Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's commemoration speech...*

As this narrative goes, this is what haunts Western Europe today, the colonialism and multiculturalism, their decline is a revenge of history. The world is again amidst incomprehensible transformation, the empires of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are finally losing their significance, and the EU is on the verge of collapse while the East is rising. Central Europe is the space between East and West, where strong nations will successfully defend their way of life against any interference, with Hungary as a leading force in this struggle.

Márton Békés and Áron Máthé make a more elaborate version of this reconceptualization; their texts reveal how much this attempt is bound to the politics of the European Union, but also how much the attempt creates a paradox<sup>30</sup>. Máthé is somewhat more traditionalist, as shown earlier, his approach tries to involve the classic idea of historical reconciliation through telling and recognizing rival histories as equally legitimate ones. He asserts that it would eliminate “the perpetrator-victim, winner-looser division that is disadvantageous for us”. His article also engages with the issues of national history and the interpretation of the causes of Trianon to a great extent, deploying most of the classic revisionist tropes. He is evidently concerned with the rivalry and opposition of national narratives that could hinder the uniform political action of these states. For him, Central Europe is a region of nationalism, where the 20<sup>th</sup> century has proven that only mass mobilization with nationalism generates strength and enables transformative action. Any other ideology, liberalism, leftist progressivism has failed. His basic historical thesis is that the dissolution of Hungary was not necessary and inevitable, but this dissolution manifests the value of nationalism too. It was, however, the “first step to make Central-Europe an area to be civilized, enlightened and disparaged from the West”. These nations are weak alone, but together strong enough to defend themselves against foreign, Western, influence. Hungarian conservatives, he writes, should be the initiators of the emancipation of Central Europe too.

30 M. Békés, *A Trianon-egenlet...* Both authors belong to a small circle of self-professed conservatives and had connections with Mária Schmidt as employees of House of Terror. Békés considers himself an ideologue of the regime too, and he is widely believed to be one of Orbán's speechwriters. See: V. Hopkins, *How Orbán's decade...* The alignments of his texts with Orbán's speech does not contradict this interpretation.

Of the three texts, Békés' draws the broadest brushstrokes and uses a language full of easily comprehensible metaphors of nationalist discourses. For him, the Hungarian Government is the avant-garde of a revolution, a new world order, in which Central European nations are united through their cultural and societal commonalities – of which, however, Békés says nothing specific. For him, the history of the region is a trap set by the external powers, its nations alternate in the role of revolting nations and imperial auxiliaries who help the oppression of the revolutionaries, whose reward is the same as their punishment. Trianon implemented this logic again, making it a common catastrophe of all the Central European nations. The Treaty created a prison of nations (obviously a reference to Austria-Hungary as *Völkerkerker*), and the manifestation of the peacemakers' orientalist-colonialist attitudes, similar to the Sykes-Picot agreement and equally disastrous. It is also a not a well-hidden reference to the Holocaust.

The solution comes from Hungary, the country that is still the geopolitical centre of the Carpathian Basin, with its “stationary national energy”. Hungary, Békés argues, is the “gravitational point” here, the oldest organized state and structure with the accompanying knowledge, traditions, institutions, and political culture. Hungarians are the most populous nation in the Carpathian Basin, and the “most stable post-Trianon state”. Since 2010, the nationalist governance reinvigorated regional cooperation, the Westernizing discourse of backwardness and catching-up with the West has lost its power, while the moment of 2020 is crucial: after the Soviet Union, the last remaining empire of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, namely the USA, is on the verge of abandoning its Wilsonian mission. Geopolitics and the common experience of Communism can help unite Central European states, he argues. However, Hungary's central role is not a novelty; Trianon was an attempt by the Western powers to stifle the emancipation of the region's nations led by Hungary 100 years ago. To fend off this effort is nothing more than the reassertion of Hungarian statehood close to its traditional form.

### **Conclusions: A post-colonial space outside its own history?**

Surprising as it was, this last attempt of reinterpreting Trianon raises questions on how much the politics of memory and politics of history can be detached from the phenomena they are supposed to rely on.

While seemingly a generous effort and even a step towards healing wounds, declaring the trauma as being over and reconciling rival national narratives, at a closer look, it is, first mostly a cleverly disguised replication of Hungarian nationalist tropes that were historically used to assert Hungarian dominance, and secondly, it is astonishingly detached from history and tradition.

We have seen that key elements of Hungarian nationalist self-understanding are used in these texts, and their focus on statehood with references to the Carpathian Basin as Hungarian space and destiny demonstrates a shift in nationalist politics of identity from people to territory. It is less palpable, but a careful analysis of geographic references can reveal that the term Central Europe is often not used as it is commonplace. Rather, most references (like “post-Trianon states”, taxative listings of Slovaks, Serbs, Slovenes, Croats, and the frequent omission of Czechia or Poland) conflate Central Europe as the space including the V4 and some adjacent countries with the Carpathian Basin as Central Europe. The latter reveals, again, how much this interpretation is more of a Hungarian nationalism’s version thought to be more palatable for neighbouring countries than a real attempt to recast Central Europe’s history. Moreover, it is a shift from the more honest conciliatory approach of 2010 as it is signified by carefully avoiding such notions at that time – especially with reference to the unique state-building capacity.

The application of post-coloniality to Trianon is also less creative as it seems, not to mention how much it is a vulgarized appropriation of the framework. Struggle over how Western modernity, including Western nationalism, transformed Eastern Europe’s societies and whether it should be accepted uncritically, is part of a long line of intellectual traditions since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Autochthonism, claims of authenticity, criticism of the implementation of ideas in societies where they created “forms without basis”, prophesizing that the renewal of a decayed Europe is led by the more traditional Eastern societies, are part of the national traditions<sup>31</sup>. On the other hand, the

31 See: B. Trencsényi, *Anéplélke. Nemzetkarakterológiai viták Kelet-Európában*, Budapest 2011; B. Trencsényi, *The Politics of “National Character”: A Study in Interwar East European Thought*, Abingdon 2012; M. Feischmidt, *Előszó*, [in:] *Nemzetdiskurzusok a mindennapokban és a nacionalizmus populáris kultúrája*, eds. M. Feischmidt et al., Budapest 2014, p. 23-24.

idea of common victimhood, as a result of Trianon and during Communism, while nested within the existing frame of anti-communist anti-liberal politics of memory, it glosses over the inequalities and asymmetric power relations within the region among its national elites and not just between Central Europe and the West (or, for that matter, the East) for centuries.

National traditions do not fare better. Whether we like it or not, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian nationalism has a vast legacy and has influenced national traditions to a great extent, just as the way of remembering Trianon since 1920 had done. While the new interpretation uses the extreme and often nonsensical elements of this legacy (cultural superiority, unique state-building capacity, and national destiny for political dominance, scapegoating, the stab-in-the-back myth, anti-liberalism, and anti-cosmopolitanism), it abandons important tenets without reflecting on them or at least giving a reason for why it is omitted. Most of these are well-embedded in society and how Trianon is remembered: the Western orientation of the country, the shared culture and civilization, the aggrievement that this Western country was sacrificed and abandoned for the successor states with their dubious civilizational level, the suffering of Hungarian minorities from the nationalizing policies of the successor states even today. Abandoning those elements tacitly, without any reflection on why this legacy is obsolete, easily creates confusion and demonstrates the easy-going way these self-professed conservatives dispose of traditions. Finally, the ostensible mental map drawn by the texts and visual pieces does not fit the Carpathian Basin, rather it fits the smaller ethnic world of Hungarians, creating another source of tension.

What is left is an arbitrarily selective commemoration and the eclectic use of the building blocks of social memory, that at certain points are utterly devoid of history. It is highly politicized and ideological, to the extent that it no longer operates in terms of memory and history but rather in terms of hegemony and ideology. The use of post-coloniality, usually refused by Hungarian historiography as a valid framework for Hungarian history, particularly demonstrates the conscious attempt of appropriating recent Western trends (!) for political aims. The most important connection with the events of 100 years earlier is neither their remembrance nor their impact as legacies on the present. The year 2020 is rather cast as a repetition of 1920, the moment

when empires collapse, a new world order is formed, and nation-states reassert their sovereignty: nations after empires. Thus, the result is akin to the usual vulgarized understanding of post-modern history writing (misunderstood for the notion of “anything goes”), a wilful combination of disparate elements. It is questionable how much it is still politics of memory and politics of history; it would perhaps be more appropriately understood as politics *with* history and memory.

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