

Jeder Nachkrieg ist ein Vorkrieg. On the Traumatic Memory of Trianon

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Introduction

When I was invited to a conference on the collective memory of Trianon to be held in Nové Zámky/Érsekújvár in the winter of 2009, I still believed that, unable to overcome my old obsession, I would speak of the importance of social history. Even though the histories of political events have given us a rather accurate picture of what had taken place in 1920, this knowledge seems to have exerted little impact on the category of phenomena that in public discussions in Hungary and Slovakia is referred to as Trianon. It goes without saying that studying this phenomenon is not solely the task of historians: to understand it properly we would also need the cooperation of wider groups such as social researchers, teachers and journalists. Especially now when these disciplines and their mediators are recurrently losing the race against nationalist politics of history and when the commandment of "no, no, never" (*nem, nem, soha*), the desire, even if not of territorial, but of spiritual revision (or at least that of justice) increasingly takes over the everyday culture of Trianon.

Beyond Political History

During the spring months of 2010 I was preparing to "campaign" for the emancipation of social history on the basis of my own former research, with examples taken from Košice/Kassa and Komárno/Komárom in the First Czechoslovak Republic. My aim would have been to embed Trianon not only in the context of the Hungarian Kingdom, but the wider social processes between the mid-19th century and the Second World War. Such *longue durée* explorations would almost automatically lead to an alternative narrative, if they managed to break with methodological nationalism. They can interpret the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the establishment of new nation states according to the logic of long-term changes in demography, institutions, settlement patterns, political participation and culture. At first hearing it might sound absurd, but I could have started by sketching the constantly changing roles Jews used to play in Kassa/Košice - Jews who have played a

preeminent role in making Upper Hungary (*Felvidék*) more Hungarian, and even in attempts at *magyarizing* it, from the 1840s all the way until 1944. I would have liked to speak of the many ways the Jews of Kassa/Košice have reflected the processes of modernization and nation state building in these hundred years that was given to them as legal citizens before their liquidation in the Shoah. I also would have spoken of how these processes taking place in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, more specifically in the Kingdom of Hungary, then later on in the first Czechoslovak Republic and in Hungary of the war years do not match our current conception of Trianon.

Another advantage of social history is the distinction it allows us to make between macro and micro processes in society. Thus, the historian is not obliged to restrict the subject of exploration to the frame of state sovereignty or national majority. It could make those subaltern social groups vocal, such as several million Slovaks, who have been excluded from the Hungarian grand narrative of Trianon until now. On the one hand, macro processes cross the inner borders of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, making it necessary to use an approach with multiple foci and examine cross-influences. On the other, micro processes confront us with diversity. They make the changing forms of Slovak-Hungarian coexistence in Upper Hungary and later on in Czechoslovakia appear in the mirror of various local hierarchies.

As a branch of such micro analyses, microstoria could deconstruct false ethnic topoi on "Hungarians" and "Slovaks" that hinder reasonable thinking. This could be done even on the basis of the life stories of individual shoemakers, electricians or teachers. [...] Microstoria also makes that distanced, ironic and self-ironic attitude visible with which Hungarian intellectuals in minority have dealt with the politics of the "mother country" (*anyaország*) in the interwar period. This is most revelatory when it comes to understanding the asymmetric, hierarchical relations between Hungarians in minoritarian and in majoritarian positions.

My praise of the possibilities of social history unfortunately cannot imply that we already have a great number of social historical works on Trianon; works that might then be overlooked by those historians who focus on the events. Quite on the contrary: the mainstream of Hungarian social historical thinking is indebted to the nation state tradition in the same manner as the writing of political history. Social historical summaries of this period bridge the gap emerging with the First World War by simply leaving out disturbing episodes such as the World War itself and making the ever-changing state borders into the borders of their research. Even if they did not proceed this way, they would nonetheless only address those parts across the new borders that used to belong to the "empire" and even there their sole concern would be the former political majority, i.e. the Magyars.

If nothing interfered, I would have added in Érsekújvár/Nové Zámky that the sociological model of the "assimilation contract" is an excellent example of the kind of thinking discussed above as it manifests the civilizational arrogance that takes the attractiveness of Hungarian culture, politics, people (indeed of whatever that is Hungarian) for granted. I could have shown that this model is so viable since it allows recognition of the attractiveness of the majority and the resourcefulness of those assimilating to it as well as majority nationalism, minority ethnocentrism and the continuation of the "politics of grievances" - the repeated but not mutual exercise of staring blankly at one's navel. (By the way, my own text is not free from such problems either since all my examples are "Hungarian" - the Slovak interpretations of the Trianon borders shall be left undiscussed this time.) [...] In the light of the assimilatory results of the times of the Dual Monarchy, ethnic changes in the successor states can be understood as dissimilation and even be conceived as disloyalty. Hungarians, Jews, etc., of these states might thus be labeled compromised. [...]

On This Side of Collective Trauma

In June 2010, the law on Trianon commemoration fell on us from above. Around the time the Hungarian Parliament passed the law many respected scholars in my country announced that the peace treaty of Trianon was "unjust" and the losses of Hungary cause "a trauma that impacts us even today". Even though fortunately there is a deep chasm between the way academicians express themselves and everyday uses of Trianon ("*trianonozás*"), I am afraid this law and the discussion of Trianon as a national trauma in authoritative expert circles creates a fragile but nevertheless walkable bridge above this chasm. This made my planned train of thought no more than the whims of a scholar: how far are we from discussing such shades of the picture? I had to realize that if Trianon was considered a national trauma by the likes of such otherwise diverse people as Ágnes Heller, Mária Ormos or Ignác Romsics even today, then my task should rather be to analyze whether this was really the case. (Due to limits of space I cannot address another question, namely that of the injustices of the peace; it shall suffice here that it can emotionalize thinking about Trianon as easily as the concept of trauma.)

90 years have passed since the signing of the peace treaty, thus the witnesses must now be at least 95 to 100 years old and even the generations brought up on the revisionist propaganda of the inter-war years are past their 80th birthday. Still, grievance discourse has not been so lively since 1945 as in the past twenty years. It is easy to see that the memory of Trianon is no longer related to primary experiences, nor can it still be a part of our communicative memory. There lives in fact hardly anyone who can still remember it; the same way as Austrian society has forgotten Saint Germain, though much was lost there too... With the fading of personal memory cultural memory fills the vacant place of

communicative memory. It takes on written form and people specializing in commemorating, objectifying, shaping cultural memory go on to create it.

[...] This is what German and Anglo-Saxon memory theory call tradition or history politics. This means that using Trianon today belongs to an ideological genre, which puts historical debates at the service of politics, providing existing attitudes with new forms. Unfortunately, it is not patriotism that gets strengthened in the case at hand but xenophobia, revanchism and resentment that are otherwise more or less similarly present in every society. [...]

The use of psychological terms is nothing new in the history of ideas in Hungary - let me just refer to the writings of István Bibó here. The term collective trauma became globally popular in research projects dealing with the Holocaust. Even though several people have warned that the use of biological and pathological terminology developed to deal with the individual psyché is not quite fortunate when the aim is to describe (the imagined) communities of several millions, this could not hinder the spread of the term, nor save it from becoming a cliché. In historical analysis, the metaphor of trauma compresses painful individual experiences that cannot be or are not dealt with and which then have a significant and measurable impact on action. The historical metaphor of Trianon revolved around the experience of unclaimed loss and defeat. Since metaphorical speech is employed, the speaker can evade naming the concrete object of loss. Almost anything can be meant by it - from territory, population through middle power status to economic and social resources, and so on. An orgy of emotions follow: the country gets "amputated", its territory "stolen", its inhabitants "kidnapped". On the other hand, historians know that Trianon was not a trauma for the whole population of the entire territory. What is more, there were people living in the "lost" territories, and more than just a few of them, for whom the new state borders caused unexpected joy. Millions of Slovaks were happy to have gained their independent statehood, to have the discrimination against them that characterized the Monarchy end, their mobility speed up and their chances of political representation multiply - they turned from an oppressed minority into a victorious majority, a partner nation in Czechoslovakia. Somewhat later when the uncertainties of belonging ended, tens of thousands of Hungarians were also grateful not to have to live in the Hungary of Horthy - and the gap between the two political systems was only widening during the mere two decades of the existence of the First Czechoslovak Republic. There were more than just a few who wanted the Czechoslovak "rule" to return after the reacquisitions of 1938.

This shows that the metaphor that has now even entered scholarly discourse is ethnocentric as it focuses exclusively on the Hungarians and thus it retrospectively *Magyarizes* multinational Upper Hungary. The use of the metaphor does not automatically mean recognition of the losses felt

by individual Hungarians either since they are summed up here in a generalized form, mixing these losses with the abstract losses of a state which can only partially be experienced by individuals - maybe not even that. The possibility of free passage between the realms of reason and instinctive emotions is thereby created. It is hard to conceive of states suffering from trauma. This contradiction is usually overcome through reference to the imagined community of the nation, which in the metaphor of Trianon appears (as opposed to the K.u.K. metaphor) as a nation state and not as a state nation (*államnemzet, Staatsnation*). In this homogenizing interpretation, there is no place for the heterogeneous experience of individual loss, in spite of the fact that this is precisely the level where we ought to discuss individual traumas (though tragedy might be the more appropriate term even here).

We know precious little about individuals and families traumatized as a consequence of Trianon and certainly not enough to base the Trianon phenomenon of today on the witnessing of this perhaps very large group. Nor is it legitimate to call Trianon a trauma that impacts us even today merely through referring to their individual suffering. The path-breaking works of Miklós Zeidler and Balázs Ablonczy give us some familiarity with the machinery of revisionist propaganda but this is merely a small fragment of the communicative memory of Trianon in the interwar years. We continue to lack the presentation of the direct experience of those "annexed away", the everyday experiences of living with the new state borders, the specific answers given by local communities and the new social identities that the change of borders necessitated. Based on the sporadic research we have it seems probable that Hungarian people living close to the border (and more generally all those who were assigned to Czechoslovakia) got dramatically disappointed with the politics of Hungary and the Hungarian state in 1920. Their experience was that of being left alone, not being wanted by anyone and not being able to trust anyone. When we use the psychological meaning of trauma in the strict sense, it means the unclaimed experience of Trianon, which remains suppressed and kept in the unconscious until today - this is what may have valid consequences even today. [...]

Not War, but Neurosis

As the past 90 years have shown, the conflicts between majority and minority (and I mean not only Slovak - Hungarian but also Hungarian - Hungarian conflicts here) can be painful, unjust, humiliating, but they rarely (and only in the case of expulsions, internments, reprisals) cause trauma on a mass scale. It can be suspected that those directly concerned have already worked through the traumatic aspects of the change of borders at the end of the cataclysmic World War. The reason history politics is nevertheless able to use Trianon is that additional tragedies followed upon it which, at least emotionally, can easily be connected to the "original" loss. The metaphor of the Trianon trauma is therefore

effective because it is able to compress all the setbacks and tragedies that befell the Hungarian minority after 1920: the peace treaty of Paris in 1947, the Beneš decrees and the tribulations under the socialist regimes. The situation has not changed after the revolutions of 1989 either: we have not managed to abolish the new inequalities that emerged in Slovak - Hungarian and Hungarian - Hungarian relations in 1920. Minority positions have stiffened in diverse ethnic hierarchies and have solidified in everyday identity politics. *Jeder Nachkrieg ist ein Vorkrieg*, as the Germans say. I am not envisioning war, but the constant discursive and performative recall of Trianon (which is now made obligatory in schools on the day of Trianon commemoration) is, to use the language of psychology, nothing but irresponsible, neurotic repetition instead of properly reckoning with past.

[...] When we reread modern Slovak and Hungarian historiography on the period what we still lack can be assessed. At the same time, we see conflicts, shifts in emphasis but also common platforms. It is a real shame that these parallel stories are hardly ever known. Even when awareness is there, the other party is still not properly taken into account - let us just observe how few Slovak - Hungarian cross-references are made. It would be a great step forward if only the writings of Gábor Gyáni, Ignác Romsics, László Szarka and all the other Hungarian historians dealing with this epoch could be read alongside and their findings "combined" with the texts written by Ľubomír Lipták, Dušan Kováč, Roman Holec or Elena Mannová. Let us include their disciples in this exercise too! Even though the counter-tendencies seem mighty, maybe there is some chance to pursue a cultured Slovak - Hungarian *Historikerstreit*.