



Trianon memorial, Békéscsaba

Author: Tobi85, URL: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Trianon\\_Statue\\_Bekescsaba\\_big.jpg?uselang=de](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Trianon_Statue_Bekescsaba_big.jpg?uselang=de)

## The "Trianon" - Debate in the Hungarian Left-Liberal Weekly *Élet és Irodalom*

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The recent debate between Éva Kovács and Krisztián Ungváry, two Hungarian intellectuals, about the memory of Trianon took place in a political context that was defined by new government policies and laws regarding dual citizenship for Hungarians living outside state borders and by ongoing political and symbolic conflicts between Slovakia and Hungary. These conflicts are deeply intertwined with the divergent interpretations of the shared history. The article reviews the main arguments made in this debate and identifies the issues that were left untouched.

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## The "Trianon" - Debate in the Hungarian Left-Liberal Weekly *Élet és Irodalom*

At the Hungarian parliamentary election of April 2010, Fidesz, the major right-wing party, won more than two-thirds of the mandates that enables it to implement far-reaching changes. Among the priorities of the new government was to launch what they call a "new era in national policy" (*nemzetpolitika*). As part of this, they significantly eased the process of acquiring dual citizenship where the obvious primary targets are the millions of ethnic Hungarians who are citizens of neighboring countries such as Romania, Slovakia, Serbia and Ukraine. The connected debate on how the voting rights of new Hungarian citizens ought to be regulated has not ended yet.

Simultaneously the new Hungarian government established a Day of National Unity on the 4 June, the day of the anniversary of the Trianon treaty signed in 1920, which meant the dismantling of historic Hungary as part of the peace treaties accepted around Paris at the end of the First World War. The exact connection between the announced "new era in national policy" and the suggestions of overcoming "Trianon" remains contested and controversial. Similarly, the regional and wider European ramifications are still to play out. What seems clear is that the Hungarian right-wing project often referred to as "the reunification of the Hungarian nation" is embedded in the process of European unification. Moot points include the extent to which the policies meant to implement this overall goal are compatible with European norms and international expectations. In other words, how far, if at all, they are different from other nationality policies in Europe and how relations between Hungary and its neighbors shall be impacted. Some of these relations, particularly the Slovak - Hungarian one, have been rather strained in recent years. The controversial language law passed in Slovakia and the reactions to it when previous governments were still in power in both countries played central roles in turning the conflict between the two states into an international concern.

The recent debate between scholars Éva Kovács and Krisztián Ungváry published in the Hungarian left-liberal weekly [Élet és Irodalom](#) took place in the political context defined, on the one hand, by the launching of the new "national policy" of the Fidesz government, including the newly declared Day of National Unity and the passing of the law on dual citizenship and, on the other, by the ongoing political and symbolic conflicts between Slovakia and Hungary, which are deeply intertwined with the divergent interpretations of the shared history of the two peoples. Five contributions were made to the debate until today, the 25 April 2011. Three of these were written by Éva Kovács. Her original piece titled "On the Traumatic Memory of Trianon" was published on the 1 October 2010.<sup>[1]</sup>

The document printed in *Élet és Irodalom* and the first reaction of Krisztián Ungváry titled "Trianon not understood" are translated into English in abridged form while the debate as a whole is summarized below. It ought to be noted that the history of Slovak - Hungarian relations have a number of specificities. Perhaps most importantly, the large majority of Slovaks and Hungarians have lived in a common state prior to 1920 and the whole territory of the state of Slovakia that emerged with the breakup of Czechoslovakia in 1993 used to be part of the historic Kingdom of Hungary. Thus, the treaty of Trianon is a crucial event in the recent history of both Slovakia and Hungary, even though it is usually evaluated in significantly different and sometimes diametrically opposed ways.

### Summary of the Contributions

In her "On the Traumatic Memory of Trianon", Éva Kovács argues for a change of approach and

perspective to the problem complex for which the label Trianon serves as shorthand. She proposes that social history with its study of modernization and nation state building could relativize what she sees as the overly strong current focus on the caesura of Trianon. She maintains that microanalyses of complex individual cases could help overcome methodological nationalism that characterize even local social historical works.

Crucially, Éva Kovács contests the use of trauma discourse, arguing that more research would be needed on how many people and in what exact ways were traumatized back then. Moreover, she argues that in the present, more than 90 years after the event, Trianon can only be part of Hungarian cultural memory. In her view, in the language of psychology its recurrent "discursive-performative" recall should rather be considered irresponsible and neurotic repetition - and not trauma, which in her view is employed in an inflated and imprecise way.

One of her main concerns appears to be the multiethnic past of the territories that compose Slovakia as well as the current national divisions among historians. She suggests that the knowledge that can be gained from the texts of Hungarian and Slovak historians should be combined and a cultured debate be pursued where points of agreement as well as differences of perspective and evaluation would become apparent.

In his reaction "Trianon not comprehended", Krisztián Ungváry argues that the post-1920 context is fundamental to the problem complex typically called "Trianon". Ungváry considers the existence of substantial Hungarian minorities and policies in countries neighboring Hungary aimed at forcibly assimilating them highly relevant factors.

In his eyes, the unequal conditions that prevail until today are behind continued Hungarian mourning over Trianon. In other words, Ungváry points to the political and moral responsibility of states neighboring Hungary for Trianon continuing to remain an unsolved problem. Moreover, propagating the idea of national unity, he contests the notion of Kovács according to which there are crucial differences between the experiences of ethnic Hungarians in minority and majority. Ungváry argues in particular that Hungarians living in different countries judge questions of mother tongue in the same way and share historical memories.

In her second piece of writing "It is nevertheless neurosis", Éva Kovács argues against ethnocentric history writing. She critiques the use of the trauma metaphor precisely for contributing to its dominance. She maintains that the category Hungarian ought to be historicized and that some hundred years ago ethnic identity was much more pluralistic in the regions under scrutiny.

In this text, Kovács also compares the Austrian way of remembering Saint-Germain with the Hungarian way of remembering Trianon. She claims that the Austrian experience of the Holocaust prevent the former from taking similar forms to the latter. She maintains that Nazism, the dense network of concentration camps across the country and the celebration of the Anschluss at Heldenplatz in Vienna in 1938 are traumatic memories for Austrians. In her eyes, in spite of the Hungarian Holocaust, this Austrian trauma has no parallel in Hungarian society that could hinder positive memories of the period and make Hungarian revanchism socially and politically unacceptable. Last but not least, Kovács reiterates her conviction that the discourse on Trianon manages to be so effective since it succeeds at simplifying and "condensing" all later failures and tragedies too.

In his response "Against Reputation Damage", Ungváry declares that for him the basic value is "the right

to identity" and that Kovács completely neglects the assimilatory pressures exerted on Hungarians though these have been experienced as atrocious. Ungváry reaffirms his conviction that at the bottom of the problem complex is not territorial loss but the forced assimilation of Hungarians across the borders. He believes that raising awareness of the Holocaust in Hungary cannot ease these grievances and attempting such a policy might even prove counter-productive.

In her "Causality is a stubborn thing", Éva Kovács propagates that the varied experiences of former generations should be understood as part of our legacy while the past should be confronted and negotiated between historians and sociologists of different countries of the region. She argues that the current problem of Hungarians across the border of Hungary cannot and should not be directly connected to Trianon. She claims that the stress on trauma only limits the freedom to act and disables responsibility for the future.

## Main Stances in the Debate and Further Issues

The debate between Éva Kovács and Krisztián Ungváry concerns the questions how the referent Trianon ought to be understood and employed. At stake in the debate is whether the multicultural, post-national or the national perspective on the modern history of the region and, more concretely, on Trianon and its consequences are to be empirically and normatively preferred.

Kovács maintains that the treaty of Trianon and its direct consequences can no longer be part of Hungarian communicative memory since more than 90 years have passed. In her eyes, the current Hungarian instrumentalizations of it resemble neurotic reactions. As opposed to Kovács, Ungváry strongly links the question of Trianon with the fate of Hungarian minorities, the ongoing violations of their right to be Hungarian and therefore sees the mourning over Trianon as basically legitimate even while distancing himself from certain forms of Trianon commemoration.

While Kovács favors a new multiethnic understanding of history, propagates reconciliation between peoples and closer cooperation between scholars, Ungváry believes that such a perspective cannot do justice to the experience of ethnic conflict and neglects the grievances of minority Hungarians whose representation should be ensured. In other words, in Kovács's account, the primary object of criticism is ethnocentrism (she wants to confront Hungarian ethnocentrism in particular) and the fundamental aim is overcoming conflict. In Ungváry's presentation, states neighboring Hungary with substantial Hungarian minorities are the primary agents in the unfolding story of Trianon and they ought to be criticized for implementing policies of forced assimilation. For him, the prime value is the right to identity. Ungváry bases his claims on the idea of Hungarian national unity as well as (though somewhat ambivalently) on the special experiences (mainly that of suffering) of Hungarians living in minority as a result of Trianon.

There are a number of important additional issues left unaddressed. To identify only a few of them: the debate (and this goes for Ungváry in particular who addresses the topic) does not attempt to compare the specificities of various Hungarian minority experiences. Their varied social compositions, political positions, historical paths as well as the evolution of their relations to Hungary remains underexplored. Nor does the debate embed the story of Hungarians in the larger process of brutal ethnic homogenization in the 20th century where the fate of Jewish and German minorities is particularly important for all three countries in the center of attention (Hungary, Slovakia as well as the admittedly more marginally discussed Romania). Such an exercise could show that the story of Hungarians living in states neighboring Hungary, next to their experience of the lack of equality brought up by both Kovács

and Ungváry (though in different ways), is also defined by the simple fact that they have (important losses notwithstanding) survived the 20th century. They continue to constitute significant ethnic groups with the chance to participate in the political life of Slovakia and Romania - since 1989 even on the highest levels. The communist era when the question of Trianon was largely tabooed is sadly neglected. The connections between 1920, the Horthy era and the present are drawn without attention being paid to the time in between. Nor are questions related to the revival of contacts and the renegotiation of positions between Hungarians in different countries and between Hungarians and members of other ethnic groups that have taken place in the present, European age discussed (such as current state politics, new initiatives of civil society, changing forms of economic contacts, paths of migration, possibilities to travel, etc.).

## Footnotes

1. She expressed her ideas in a more scholarly format too. This text appeared in issue 2010/4 of the journal *Limes*, pp. 47-56.

