

THE TREATY OF TRIANON AND ITS MYTHS

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The Treaty of Trianon is part of a series of treaties which concluded the First World War and shaped the new Europe. It was a treaty signed by the new Hungary on the ruins of the defeated Kingdom of Hungary, which bound it to respect the new configuration of Central Europe. Dejected and profoundly embittered, it accepted the difficult conditions which it considered from the beginning as disproportionate, unjust and cruel.

Owing to the destabilisation of the country and the Bolshevik revolution, Hungary only received an invitation to the peace conference in January 1920. This suited the Hungarians because they were eager to temporise, hoping that the contradictions between the Allied Powers would turn into disagreements, that the hard edges of their uncompromising policy would soften and that they would have a greater interest in making concessions to the Hungarians. The reality turned out to be quite different. For the Allied Powers, peace with Hungary was not paramount; it was in fact a marginal issue. The USA did not take part in negotiations on the peace treaty with Hungary. Hungarian hopes were based on all this, but the end result was that the willingness to open up new issues and “threaten” the established order in Central Europe was minimal, even non-existent. Therefore it was primarily France which pulled the strings according to its own needs and interests.

The Hungarian tactic ended up producing no real results; the conditions for peace were ready, containing no long-term changes and surprises. Everything remained as before. The borders with Czechoslovakia, for example, had already been drawn up in June 1919.

The Hungarian delegation arrived in Paris on January 7th 1920. The farewells bidden at Budapest station were full of determination. This uplifting spirit of togetherness when under threat and of a common existential interest continued all the way up to the border, since the train stopped in every significant town. Everywhere, thousands of people gathered on the platforms and near the

rails; everywhere, strong feelings of solidarity were expressed. The Paris delegates must truly have felt that the nation was with them. This feeling is not common – rare even – for a politician but in these circumstances it had a tragic undertone, for an unimaginable threat was hanging over the Hungarians.

The head of the delegation was probably the greatest (certainly the highest-ranking) figure in Hungarian politics of the time, Count Albert Apponyi. His breadth of views, statesman's abilities and experience, diplomatic skills and linguistic competencies predetermined him to take on such a position, yet this was not a wise choice. Had the Hungarians wished to demonstrate their links with the old Hungary and its political culture, they could not have chosen a better candidate. Apponyi was literally a symbol of the aristocratic nature of the state and of its ethnic policy, which had never been its showcase feature. His name was associated with the school laws, but also with the Černová massacre and a whole series of court cases and reprisals against the Slovak elite and ordinary people. Hungarians saw in him hope and support, and in addition he exercised great authority over the members of the delegation.

After the presentation of the letters of credence, the text of the peace treaty was handed over to the Hungarians on January 15th 1920. On the morning of the same day Apponyi sent to the Supreme Council eight memoranda with annexes which fitted with difficulty into one car, causing consternation at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These were the results of several months of work by whole teams of experts. Probably the most important memorandum was the so-called presentation memorandum, which presented the unity of Hungary and its advisability from different aspects, including historical ones.

At the afternoon hand-over of peace terms, which took place in a very formal and cold atmosphere, Clemenceau agreed on Apponyi giving his speech the following day and summing up orally the Hungarian standpoint, but warned him not to hope for any discussion. When the Hungarian delegates opened the proposal for the peace treaty in their hotel, they must have been taken aback. Although they were prepared for anything, a glance at the map of the new Hungary was devastating. What else could be done?

Apponyi's speech as perceived by his contemporaries was coloured by the context of the time. Hungarians speak of a glorious moment and his excellent speech which had a huge impact on those present. The underlying idea remained the integrity of the state, as stated in the presentation memorandum, for which Apponyi marshalled a whole range of different arguments. A new element was the demand for a people's vote (plebiscite). It is crystal clear that over time Apponyi's speech acquired the status of a myth, for it did not change a single comma in the terms of the peace treaty, and the arguments of the Hungarian representative brought nothing fundamental and nothing new. Pál Teleki, a geographer and important politician, many times minister and prime minister who had prepared the map documentation and whose ethnographic "carte rouge"

had become legendary, had other ideas about the content of the speech. Apponyi should not have insisted so firmly on the integrity of the state; he should have been more accommodating and the whole concept should have been more flexible. It is of course questionable as to whether this would have led to a more positive result. Great Britain preferred giving in to France and sacrificing the Žitný ostrov region, if it meant obtaining concessions anywhere in the Near East during the division of mandatory territories or strategic mineral resources.

On its return to Budapest, the Hungarian delegation brought with it a draft of the peace treaty, which had already been mediated and was generally known, that first stirred up indignation, followed by lethargy. The sombre black state flags hanging at half-mast expressed with an oppressive urgency the cruel fact that the huge and still unimaginable territorial losses were becoming a more and more certain reality. Apponyi continued to proclaim that peace in such a form was inconceivable and unacceptable.

Over the following days, feverish discussions were held and ideas pondered; the results were the so-called eighteen response memoranda with numerous annexes. The Hungarian delegation took them to Paris in a separate wagon. The integrity of the state and the historical principle continued to be discussed, but an increased emphasis was placed on the will of the people expressed in a plebiscite. This was the principle of self-determination bandied about by the American president and which the American delegation had made into a key factor in peace negotiations; it was also the factor which the Americans betrayed the most.

The conditions of the treaty might have been unacceptable, but Hungary had no other choice. The Regent, Miklós Horthy, therefore announced Hungary's readiness to sign. Apponyi together with the whole delegation resigned, since they had achieved nothing, and none of them desired to sign such a treaty.

June 4th 1920 was no ordinary day. For many people in Central Europe, it held something unique and exciting, exemplified by a tense expectation and the amazing feeling that on this very day one long era in history was coming to an end and an entirely new one was beginning. It was supposed to be a day when history was being made (and signed).

That day, Paris was bathed in beautiful sunlight after some morning rain. At two thirty in the afternoon, cars sporting a Czechoslovak flag (Krno, 1920) were lining up outside the luxury Regina hotel in which Edvard Beneš was staying. Gradually other vehicles arrived, and a convoy of cars containing the Czechoslovak, Yugoslav and Romanian delegations made its way through the streets of Paris towards the Bois de Boulogne, crossing the silver ribbon of the majestic Seine, through parks and woods, until the picturesque grounds of Versailles opened up before them. The grounds included the two Trianon châteaux. The cars headed for the Grand Trianon château, where the historic signatures were to be written in the largest room, the *Grande Galerie*.

Only five years later people would mistakenly say that the peace treaty was signed in the Petit Trianon summer-house, and that this Petit Trianon should be a Mecca for Slovak tourists. This myth was long-lasting in Hungarian journalism, too. In fact, it is not a summer-house, but rather a small castle or château which did not, however, have a suitable room, unlike the Grand Trianon château half a kilometre away, where the gallery was 57 metres long and 7 metres wide. This is where the politicians headed. Inside, the room was dominated by a large horse-shoe shaped table with a soft leather top. This is where the delegates of each country had their seats. Journalists, politicians and important guests were jostling each other everywhere.

Suddenly, everyone fell silent. It was 16.25 and the Hungarian delegates were entering the room, led by two footmen from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs wearing large silver chains around their necks. The third-rate politicians entrusted with the signature of the peace treaty, Ágost Benárd and Alfréd Drasche-Lázár, entered dressed in immaculate frock coats, top hats in hand and wearing snow-white gloves. They looked poker-faced, but inwardly they must have been experiencing a whirlwind of emotions. Four young aristocratic-looking secretaries followed both delegates into the room. Events then moved very fast. The French Prime Minister, Alexandre Millerand, stood up, declared the meeting open amid complete silence and called on the Hungarian delegates to sign the peace treaty. The latter stood up and walked one by one to the small Louis XV table where the document was waiting. The clock showed 16.30. First Benárd signed the treaty, still standing and not using the pen prepared on the table, but his own pen. After Benárd, Drasche-Lázár signed the document after sitting down and using the same pen. By so doing, they both wished to show that this was no ceremonial act on the Hungarian part, but one done under duress and thus not binding.

The other delegates made their way in turn to the table and signed with emotions running a lot higher than the Hungarians. For Czechoslovakia, it was signed by Edvard Beneš and Štefan Osuský with a satisfied smile on his face. He saw in his mind a flashback from his earlier life in which he apparently remembered the school inspection arriving in the Prešporok [Bratislava] lyceum in the spring of 1905, led by the then Minister of Religion and Education, Albert Apponyi, who praised him for the knowledge of Latin he displayed. However, when Apponyi discovered that Osuský was from Brezová, he added that this was the very place where all the revolts against the Hungarian had been born. Asked whether he would be a good Hungarian, Osuský remained silent, which Apponyi saw as dissent and an insult, and consequently made sure that not only was he expelled from the lyceum, but at the beginning of 1906 the young man was also excluded from all secondary schools in Hungary. He thus practically drove him to the USA. This popular and often-told story of amends and just reward, of how a Slovak peasant boy became a politician who signed the death certificate of the thousand-year-old Hungary, has, however, one great

flaw. Apponyi only became Minister of Religion and Education at the time when the young Osuský was already on board the ship taking him from Bremen to New York. This is the first of many myths generated over the century since the signature of the peace treaty. And one of the few Slovak myths (Hoover Institution Archives, Box 60).

However, let us return to the room in the Grand Trianon palace. The whole process lasted fifteen minutes, after which Millerand concluded the meeting. The Hungarians quickly left the room, got into their waiting cars and left to be forgotten by history. Drasche-Lázár spent one more year in diplomacy, Benárd was involved in internal Hungarian party politics until the beginning of the Second World War and only died in July 1968.

The Czechoslovak, Romanian and Yugoslav delegates congratulated one-another and started lively discussions. As they left the château, the fine weather appeared to match their triumphant mood.

In Hungary, at that time the church bells were ringing, and the country officially went into state mourning. The articles of treaty were constantly being read, over and over again, repeated and engraved in the memory, these articles that had stripped the “great” or “historic Hungary” of 70 % of its territory and around two thirds of its population. This lost population included three million Hungarians who had suddenly become foreigners in new states and also an entirely new minority.

The territorial losses remained those of the consensus on which the Allied Powers had agreed already by the end of 1918. Until the last minute, the Hungarians did not want to believe the reality, just as they had not believed in the autumn of 1918 that the war had been lost, or that in a few months’ time their state would begin to collapse. Despite all their efforts for territorial change, despite all the maps with evidence in their favour, despite territories where up to 90 % of the population was clearly Hungarian and which were supposed to be ceded to foreign states, the Treaty of Trianon merely codified a situation which had already been on paper for eighteen months. A state of “small Hungary” or “csonka Magyarország” remained with a population of seven million, mainly Hungarians.

The ink had no sooner dried on the treaty than the irresponsible politicians in power were already convincing the public that this was only something temporary, that a review was in sight, that their answer was “*nem, nem, soha*” (“no, no, never”). A policy of revision and irredentism was stirred up, leading Hungary several time into dead ends. Although much strong talk abounded in Hungary, and the press was full of indignant determination, Parliament finally ratified the Treaty of Trianon in mid-November 1920. The international community had sufficient mechanisms to ensure that even countries more powerful than Hungary could be forced to meet the obligations ensuing from their signature. There was simply no other way.

The Hungarian perception of Trianon means feelings of wrongdoing and injustice, human and national tragedy, prostration and isolation. Trianon took on a whole set of myths, naturally more on the Hungarian side. This has its own logic; it is always better to explain something away with an invented excuse or statement, or the search for a guilty party elsewhere, rather than look for the causes in one's own mistakes and failings. Even today, explanations are thus made up in this way, seeing worldwide Jewish conspiracies (represented by Masaryk in the Czechoslovak context) behind the Treaty of Trianon, freemason conspiracies (this makes room for the demonised Beneš) and the imperialistic objectives of all the neighbouring states (Raffay, 1990, p. 110). The Hungarians are cast in the role of the innocent, defenceless victims abandoned to the mercy of those liberal and often cosmopolitan forces. Or to the direct and egoistic nationalism of the surrounding states. This is a rhetoric which remains popular even today, and that can be applied to other matters, too, not only to the Treaty of Trianon.

Among the traditional myths peddled with a more or less hidden spuriousness and to be found even in works of apparently serious history, is the myth about Hungary becoming rather a victim of its circumstances, that no-one in the country had wanted war, that the enthusiasm for war did not correspond to the truth, which is traditionally demonstrated using the anti-war stance of the prime minister, István Tisza. This was a half-truth, and prime minister Tisza in time became just as fervent a supporter of war as he had been an opponent of it before. In relation to him, we should not forget one consideration which is rather fanciful, albeit less sophisticated, but in essence even more desperate. Some people see in Tisza a politician of a calibre such as Hungary acutely lacked after 1918, someone who would supposedly have been capable of preventing Trianon and of guiding the Hungarians out of their desperate situation (Ifj. Bertényi, 2019, p. 35-76).

A much more concrete and long-held myth was the search to explain the French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau's almost obsessive anti-Hungarian attitude by his family circumstances. Clemenceau himself personified all the negatives of Trianon. The fact that Clemenceau's son Michel, a graduate of an institute of agricultural science in Switzerland and an employee of the Kuffner sugar refinery in Diószeg (now Sládkovičovo), married in 1901 in Galanta a Hungarian woman of yeoman stock, Ida Michnay, and that despite their having two sons their marriage quickly fell apart, was a sad chapter in their life, but it certainly did not give her father-in-law an anti-Hungarian bias. In the end, he fell out with his son, too, and they did not speak to each other for years.

Another myth that has become legendary was to point out how Czechoslovak experts tricked the Allied Powers at the peace conference on the subject of rivers, which they prioritised as a border, over the much more northerly linguis-

tic border. For this reason, they presented the rivers Ipeľ and Roňava as navigable rivers of strategic importance for transport. The Roňava river was a rather more blatant case. It was more of a stream, 13.5 kilometres of which form the state border, dividing Slovenské Nové Mesto from Sátoraljaujhely, which was long expected to belong to Czechoslovakia, so it did not make much sense to turn this stream into a navigable river. However, when the committee came to measure the borders, the Czechs apparently lit a fire on the shores of the stream and covered it with rugs, in order to be able to tell the delegates that this intermittent smoke came from the chimney of a boat sailing on the Roňava. Such nonsensical anecdotes were supposed to show how artificially the new borders had been constructed.

One of the most unbelievable Hungarian myths concerned some chosen Romanian women; today we could call them high-class prostitutes. These apparently nationalistic-thinking daughters of boyars were supposed to have influenced the decisions of allied politicians by using their female charms, and all under the protective wing of Queen Marie of Romania, who was a vehement advocate of the interests of Romania at the peace conference (Ablonczy, 2010).

Czechoslovakia cultivated a whole range of myths concerning itself, and its predecessors. In order to distinguish itself from the monarchy and in order to justify the establishment of a republic to rescue the Slovaks, it had to show young people who had not experienced Hungary for themselves that every day in that country had been for Hungarian Slovaks a constant struggle for survival. This is how Czechoslovak history and its historical memory were constructed. For this reason, situations in Hungary were presented in an exceptionally stark and bloody manner, just as Hungarian commentators had once done when they wanted to legitimise national oppression and their own strong-arm tactics. Every type of nationalism is happy to use the same tactics against its opponent.

Unlike the Austrians, building a new state and their own identity, unlike the Germans, living alone for revenge and their new vision, unlike the Bulgarians, searching for their place in the Balkans, and unlike the Turks, literally fighting for new conditions and a new peace treaty, the kingdom of Hungary lived on its past and persistently tried to return to it through a revision of the treaty. An armed struggle was unrealistic and it did not even have the means for it. Therefore, it did not arm itself and provoke as did the Germans, nor fight as did the Turks. But neither did it seek sympathy like the Bulgarians, or a new place in Europe like the Austrians. It looked for ways of extricating itself from a certain isolation, of weakening its neighbours and of using every situation to seek a revision of the Treaty of Trianon, an aim which ended up being official state doctrine. This included looking for a guilty party in the trinity which symbolised and personified the history of Trianon: Albert Apponyi (István Tisza), Mihály Károlyi and Béla Kun. Which of these figures held the greatest share of guilt for the Hungarian 20th century? One of the Trianon myths, which per-

sists even today, is the relatively simple answer: Károlyi by his pacifism and liberalism, Károlyi by his compliance and handover of power to the extreme left-wing holds the greatest share of guilt according to Hungarian public opinion in the negative development and subsequent impasse in Hungarian society. The responsibility of Hungarian politicians from the old guard is more likely not to be mentioned; the voluntarism and complete political isolation of the country in 1919 thanks to the left-wingers are also played down, as is Károlyi's staunch refusal to sign the tabled peace agreement. On the contrary, only his naivety and pacifism are highlighted, as if anybody else would have had greater opportunities and more room for manoeuvre. Among Hungarian intellectuals, István Bibó stands out almost alone, arguing that "the democratic Hungarian republic of Mihály Károlyi fell apart because the peace conditions of the Treaty were made public and Mihály Károlyi relied only on the power of the proletariat who – as he dared believe – might help the country stand up against their absurdity. Thereafter, the situation changed dramatically and Horthy's supporters took it upon themselves to criticise the peace treaty, since they needed to compensate for his signature on the document which Károlyi was not willing to sign. According to Károlyi, "irredentism fed by reaction is a worse danger than all the errors of the territorial directives of the peace treaty" (Bibó, 1997, p. 243). This was not – and could not be – a very popular view in Hungary. Neither Horthy's regime, nor present-day Hungary, even entertains such an opinion. Everything turns on the question of what came first, and the idea that irredentism and reaction were a consequence of Trianon, not a consequence of the failings of the political system, suits much better the official rhetoric; and these failings were of course present long before Trianon.

In reality, Trianon was the consequence of a whole series of factors: Hungary's military defeat in a world war, the overall geopolitical situation at the end of the war and in its immediate aftermath, as well as the complete alienation of individual nations from the mother state, and thus in this sense also the consequence of the pre-war policy of nationalism. However, it was certainly not a consequence of the "millenary oppression", or the centuries of struggle by Slovaks for national emancipation. Nevertheless, it appears that the greater the distance in time, the simpler, more logical and more straightforward everything appears.

The "latest" Hungarian myth which has appeared (also) recently, is the nonsensical claim that one hundred years later, Trianon, supposedly like every similar peace treaty, automatically becomes invalid. Such persistently recycled myths reveal all too clearly the mentality of society. Instead of self-criticism, self-reflection and searching for answers to various new (and old) questions, the opposite is true it is much simpler, more primitive even... And this is more convenient for consumers as well as for those who prepare such "dishes". In this way the latter "prepare" people in order to impose on them their political views...

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