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Trianon: A Relic of the Past or a Continuing Tragedy?

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Over the course of its more than 100-year history, the American Hungarian Federation has commemorated the Treaty of Trianon,¹ highlighting the gross injustices wrought by that treaty (better described as a diktat) and the entire Versailles so-called peacemaking, including how it dismembered Hungary; transferred more than three million Hungarians to foreign rule; treated Hungarians and their ancient homeland as pawns and chattels; ignored the vaunted principle of self-determination; denied the affected populations the right to choose through plebiscites; destroyed a self-contained, geographically and economically coherent and durable formation in the Carpathian Basin and boasting the longest lasting historical borders of Europe; and set the stage for a conflagration and human suffering on a vast and virtually incomprehensible scale. No wonder that even Harold Nicolson, the young British diplomat at the peace conference, was appalled by what he witnessed and aptly described the peacemakers as “ignorant and irresponsible men.”

The ill-conceived Treaty of Trianon was a part of this extraordinarily flawed Versailles “peacemaking” that had devastating consequences for the victors and vanquished alike. As one commentator astutely noted:

If there was a single moment in the twentieth century when it all might have been different, this was the moment: Paris, 1919. The end of the Great War, which in perfect hindsight we call World War I, changed everything. Certainly the peace imposed at Versailles by the Western powers – Britain, France, Italy, and the United States – on the vanquished, not to mention the weak, the powerless, the orphaned, and the friendless, determined much of what went wrong for the balance of the century and beyond.²

Among the failures of Versailles:

the Fourteen Points – under whose banner American boys had gone to war, and often their deaths, on the battlefields of France and Belgium – were eviscerated by America’s own allies, all of whom had come to Paris with their own particular priorities. None of these involved self-determination, territorial integrity, or the various freedoms on which the Points were based.³

Indeed, Versailles “proved a colossal failure for Woodrow Wilson, for the United States, and for the future of the world that had hoped it might be governed by principles of freedom and self-determination – even today.”⁴

Even today! And that is the point and the problem. Trianon is not only tragic history, it is a lingering tragedy which continues to affect the Hungarian minorities and historical communities living in the states neighboring Hungary. For instance, while Romania obtained a large chunk of Hungarian territory by the Treaty of Trianon – more territory than remained as Hungary – it refuses to this day to grant the legitimate aspiration of its Hungarian minority for various forms of autonomy that do not threaten the territorial integrity of Romania but which would promote democracy.⁵

And Slovakia, which was detached from Hungary by Trianon to form Czechoslovakia, exercised its right of external self-determination when it broke away from Prague's perceived dominance in 1992. Nonetheless, Slovakia has taken a series of official actions that have created an inhospitable environment for Slovakia's Hungarian minority. These actions include the gerrymandering of the administrative division of Slovakia so that Hungarians are in the minority in the administrative regions; adopting a resolution proposed by extremist Jan Slota ratifying and confirming the Benes decrees (which imposed collective guilt on Hungarians and continue to adversely affect them); refusing to rehabilitate Janos Esterhazy, who as leader of the Hungarian Party in Tiso's Fascist Slovakia was the only Member of Parliament to vote against the deportation of Jews in 1942, yet who died in a Czechoslovak prison after the war; adopting a discriminatory language law that curtails or eliminates the use of minority languages from the public sphere, which law targets ethnic Hungarians; and now most recently adopted a law that threatens to strip Hungarians in Slovakia of their citizenship if they apply for Hungarian citizenship made possible by an act of the Hungarian parliament extending citizenship to Hungarians living beyond Hungary's border – a sensible approach by Budapest to lessen the adverse impact of Trianon without threatening the states neighboring Hungary and an approach that is consistent with dual citizenship policies in Europe.

In the final analysis, but for Trianon there would be no Hungarian minorities who are subjected to discriminatory policies. There would not be a need for the type of citizenship law recently adopted by Budapest that seeks to protect these minorities.

Trianon, however, occurred. And considering the far-reaching implications of discrimination, intolerance, and hatred directed at the Hungarian minorities, the response from the European Union and the United States to date has been tepid. But it is not the victims of discrimination who cause intra-state and inter-state tensions but the victimizers.

It can be hoped that ninety years after Trianon, an ill-conceived treaty that created these adverse conditions, steps will be taken to ensure that Western values, democratic principles and international norms and practices relating to national minorities will finally prevail in Central and Eastern Europe, thereby at long last relegating Trianon to the history books.

NOTES

¹ American Hungarian Federation, Treaty of Trianon site at:

http://www.americanhungarianfederation.org/news_trianon.htm

² David A. Andelman, *A Shattered Peace: Versailles 1919 and the Price We Pay Today*, (2008) at 1-3.

³ *Id.* at 285.

⁴ *Id.* at 284.

⁵ *Foreign Policy Review*: Article by Frank Koszorus, Jr., President of the American Hungarian Federation available at:

http://www.americanhungarianfederation.org/docs/ForeignPolicyReview_Autonomy.pdf