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The Apple of Eris the Political Consequences of the 1918–20 peace treaties

Abstract. In the article the author analyzes the history of Central Europe from the collapse of Austria-Hungary – when, in fact, this political and geographical concept appeared – to the present day. The emergence of new States on the post-war map did not lead to reconciliation and the establishment of a long-term peace in the region, but rather, on the contrary, resulted in a new long-term conflicts and enmity. This granted the leading Powers the opportunity to solve their geopolitical problems at the expense of small States. In turn, the Central European nations, which emerged on the site of Europe's largest Empire, began to rely on external powers in hope of maintaining or overcoming the established status quo. Economic factors mixed with ethnic and as a result it brought to a significant decrease in the standard of living of Central Europeans. Against this background, economically strengthening Germany gave some leaders hope to overcome the lag, as well as in general looked as a promising ally, granting hope for the resolution of political problems. However, the defeat of Germany in World War II, meant for the allies the rollback to the borders of 1920. The Communist regimes established here since the second half of the 1940s, again plunged the region into problems. And only after joining the European Union and the Schengen – according to the author – the peoples had gained the hope to overcome the injustices that prevailed over this part of Europe for almost 100 years.

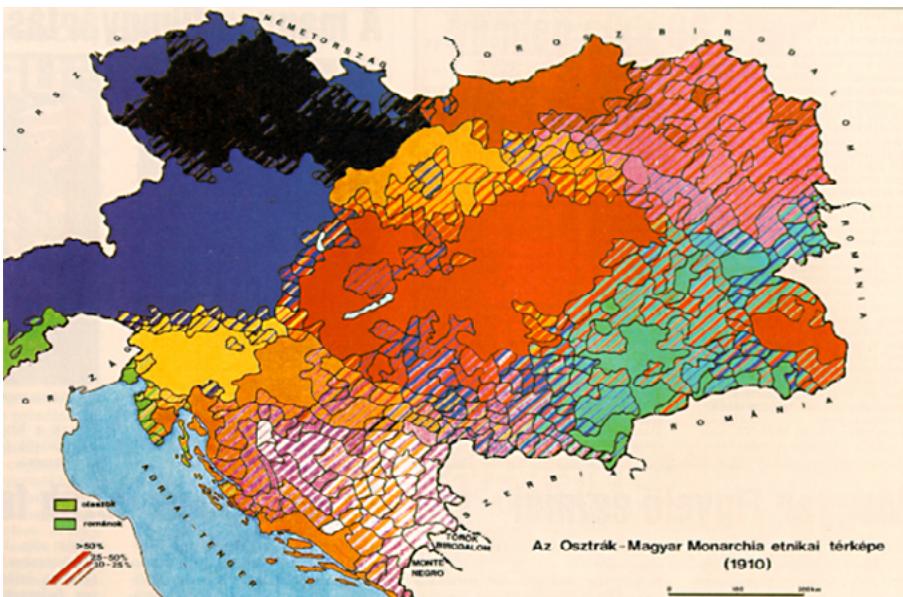
Key words: Central Europe, national minorities, borders, the Treaty of Trianon, post-war settlements.

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As we know from Greek mythology the goddess Eris (the name means “strife”) tossed in the midst of a feast held by the gods at a wedding a golden apple as a prize for the most beautiful woman. Three goddesses, Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite competed, thus sparking a vanity-fueled dispute among them, which eventually led to the Trojan War. In a figurative sense the apple of Eris, the apple of discord is an object or a subject which leads to arguments, conflicts between several parties.

At the end of the First World War the central area of Europe, to a large degree the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and particularly the territory of the historic Kingdom of Hungary was the golden apple to be distributed among the States which emerged out of the ruins of the defeated Central Powers and revolutionary Russia. 2018 is the 100th anniversary of the rebirth of Poland (and Lithuania), Ukraine (only temporarily), and the birth of independent Finland, Estonia, Latvia (out of the Russian Empire). The break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy led to the creation of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia (at first called the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, but practically a Greater Serbia), the enlargement of Romania (with Transylvania, Bukovina and Bessarabia/Moldova), and also to the independence of the Republic of Austria and the Kingdom of Hungary. The Ottoman Empire having lost its Arabic regions changed to Turkey. The problem which resulted in so many quarrels and tensions between the countries mentioned was not so much the appearance of a “New Europe” of mainly smaller states but the unfair drawing of the borders separating them. The President of the United States of America came up with what looked like a simple and natural principle, the self-determination of peoples. It sounded great, but was most difficult to realize even with the best intentions. Many territories in the larger Central Europe were not inhabited by one people: they were ethnically mixed, where languages and religious denominations lived side-by-side, overlapping. It was impossible to apply the principle of self-determination, borders to be based on the principle of nationality, so as to be found acceptable for all the countries affected.

In treaties imposed rather than negotiated Germany (at Versailles, June 28, 1919) and Bulgaria (at Neuilly in November 1919) both suffered minor territorial losses, while Austria (at Saint German in September, 1919) became a small German state but was denied the right to join Germany. Based on ethnic, historical, economic and strategic arguments Hungary (on June 4, 1920 at the palace Trianon in the park of Versailles) was reduced to a quarter of its former territory and a third of its population, transferring together with 6.5 million non-Hungarians 3.5 million protesting Hungarians (as well as 88 % of forests, 83 % of iron, 100 % of salt, 74 % of roads and 62 % of railways) to the neighbouring states. (The new state was often called “Rump Hungary”.) Turkey lost 80% of its pre-war territory (even Istanbul and the coast of Asia Minor) in



The Paris Peace Conference (1919–1920) created “a new Europe”

the Treaty of Sevres (1920), but Kemal pasha (“Atatürk”) organized successful resistance and secured all predominantly Turkish territories in the Treaty of Lausanne (July, 1923).¹

Since the national/ethnic principle was not followed in so many cases where it would have been possible (Dobruja, Macedonia, Southern Slovakia, Vojvodina, Transylvania, Silesia, the western rim of Czechoslovakia, both the western and the eastern regions of Poland) special treaties were prescribed and then duly signed for the protection of the civil and educational as well as linguistic rights of the 30 million people who became national minorities as a

1 Charles Seymour, an expert of the “Inquiry,” the American study group created to prepare materials for the peace negotiations, admitted that “The Commission is forced to the conclusion that the frontiers proposed are unsatisfactory as the international boundaries of sovereign states. It has been found impossible to discover such lines, which would be at the same time just and practical. An example of the injustice that would result may be instanced in the fact that a third of the area and population of the Czechoslovak state would be alien to that nationality. Another lies in placing a quarter of the Magyars under foreign domination. But any attempt to make the frontier conform more closely to the national line destroys their practicability as international boundaries. Obviously many of these difficulties would disappear if the boundaries were to be drawn with the purpose of separating not independent nations, but component portions of a federalized state.” Charles Seymour, “Epitome of Reports on Just and Practical Boundaries within Austria-Hungary for Czechoslovaks, Jugo-Slavs, Rumanians, Poles, Ruthenians, Magyars,” undated [around the end of 1918], National Archives, Washington D.C., NA RG 256. Inquiry Doc. 514.

result of the new borders. The newly created League of Nations was assigned the task to guarantee all the provisions of the new European order. In sum the peace settlement combined what was probably necessary and inevitable with decisions contrary to Wilson's principles and unnecessarily humiliating.

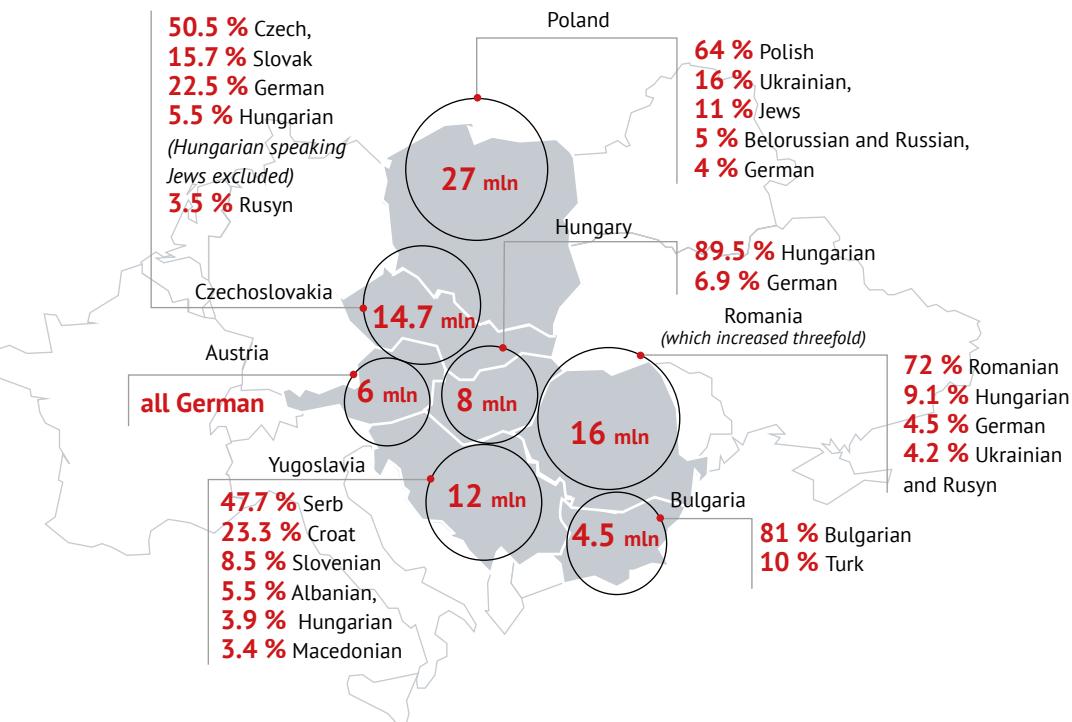
Apart from the territorial losses there was the moral and financial burden of "war guilt": the peace treaties stated that sole responsibility for the world war rested with the losers, therefore they were to pay a large amount of war reparations. The defeated countries were convinced that they were victims of grave injustice; they were determined to change or even overthrow the new territorial and political setup. The result was the perpetuation of the division of Europe into hostile groups.

The triumph of Nationalism in the 1920s

"There is not one of the peoples or provinces that constituted the Empire of the Habsburgs to whom gaining their independence has not brought the tortures which ancient poets and theologians had reserved for the damned."

Winston Churchill, The Gathering Storm. London, 1948, 14.

Churchill's judgment at first appeared to be valid only for the vanquished nations, but by the end of World War II it became sadly true for all the "successor states". The birth defect of the new states was their national composition; they were not really "national" states but multinational ones. According to their first census their composition was the following:



It took time for the new borders to consolidate. There were tensions and clashes between the new states over territory: e.g. Vilnius-Vilna between Poland and Lithuania, the Banat between Romania and Serbia, Macedonia between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, Dobruja contested by Romania and Bulgaria. Instead of trying to win over or placate their minorities practically all these states mistreated them to various extent: minority rights were not kept, a land reform was carried out to their detriment, there were efforts at assimilating them through the schools, and repressive measures (expulsions, denying citizenship, no permission for minority institutions and press, etc.) were introduced. At the same time there were high hopes in the victorious states about their future: they were independent, had generous borders, enjoyed the strong support of France, Hungary's neighbours formed a "Little Entente" to make sure Hungary would not deal with them separately. The new dominating nations built centralist as opposed to federalist states. They denied autonomy to their "brother nations," the Czechs to the Slovaks and the Rusyns, the Serbs to the Croats and Slovenes. Even the century-old Croatian Parliament, the Sabor was abolished. Nationalism became a kind of religion, a mass phenomenon. "In each of the new states there prevailed a narrow official nationalism," and the repressive policies used against national, religious and political minorities led to perpetual internal and external divisions and conflicts. "This state of generalized and mutual hostility provided opportunities for any great power intent on disturbing the peace."² Instead of finding their common interests the "small, unstable caricatures of modern states"³ were looking for great-power patrons for the maintenance or for the overthrowing of the new order.

In addition to post-war inflation it was difficult to integrate the new territories economically: the new borders created customs barriers and broke up previous market systems. In most countries there was rampant corruption. All that led to a decrease in the standard of living. The peasants remained extremely poor, with little opportunity for upward mobility. The Great Depression of 1929–33 hit the new Central Europe, its agricultural economies especially hard. Germany now run by Hitler came to their help: offered barter agreements by which it exchanged its high quality industrial goods to the agricultural surplus of the agrarian states; by the late 1930s those clearing agreements bound all the smaller Central European states economically to Germany.

- 2 Hugh and Christopher Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe: R.W. Seton-Watson and the Last Years of Austria-Hungary*. London, 1981. 435.
- 3 F.H. Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace. Theory and Practice in the History of Relations between States*. Cambridge, 1963. 282.

Internal political stability was also lacking. In every country there were too many parties in the parliaments and that made governing difficult. The outcome was some form of dictatorship. In Poland Pilsudski's coup in 1926 led to a relatively mild authoritarian state, in Yugoslavia royal dictatorship was introduced in 1928, at the end of the 1930s the same took place in Romania. In Bulgaria Stambolijski's semi-dictatorship of peasants was overthrown in 1923, the solution was a benevolent and enlightened absolutist regime by Tsar Boris.

In principle the League of Nations could mediate in international conflicts and could facilitate peaceful changes of the new borders — provided there was either bilateral agreement on that or the Great Powers gave strong support to that. It was only Nazi Germany which had the will and the strength to be instrumental in such changes. Under the impact of Germany the political map of Central Europe changed substantially between 1938 and 1941. At the Munich Conference in September 1938 Great Britain and France agreed that Czechoslovakia should cede its German-inhabited regions, usually referred to as the Sudetenland, to Germany. Pressed by the Appendix to the Munich Agreement Czechoslovakia also gave up Tesin (Cieszyn) to Poland in October 1938, and Hungary acquired the predominantly Hungarian-inhabited southern rim of Slovakia in the Vienna Award /Diktat in November 1938. Germany marched into Prague in March 1939, and in its wake Hungary (re)occupied Podcarpatska Rus (Subcarpathia), leaving Slovakia as a nominally independent puppet state of Germany. The Soviet Union, in a secret deal with Germany divided North-eastern Central Europe with Germany. Following the fourth partition of Poland (September 1939) it annexed the Baltic States in early 1940 and took Bessarabia (Moldova) from Romania in June 1940. In order to bind both Romania and Hungary to Germany Hitler (together with Mussolini) divided Transylvania into two; the North (having a slight Hungarian majority) went to Hungary, while the larger southern part was retained by Romania. In the spring of 1941 Nazi Germany attacked Yugoslavia and carved it up, making Croatia nominally independent and giving some portions to Hungary (today's Vojvodina) and Italy respectively. Most of these territorial changes had some justification from a historical or ethnic standpoint, but were carried out in an arbitrary, aggressive way by Hitler, without even the formally ascertaining the feelings of the populations affected. The disputes over territory and the treatment of the national minorities, that apple of Eris, seduced and corrupted the leaders and the peoples of Central Europe, preventing them from presenting a common front to the aggressors.

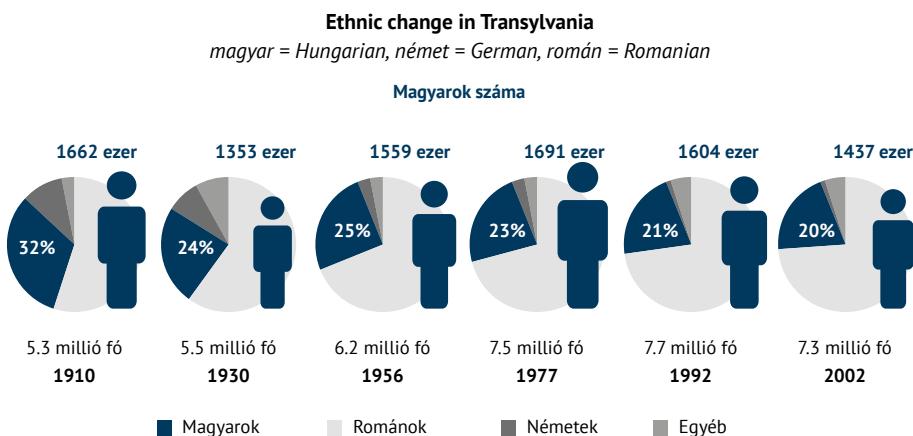
All paid a very heavy price for their selfish and short-sighted policies during World War II. An American historian found an apt name for Central Europe engulfed in conflict and war: bloodlands⁴. In fifteen horrible years

starting in the 1930s tens of millions were tortured and murdered on the territory of Poland, the Soviet Union, the Carpathian Basin and the Balkans on the battlefield, in concentration camps, gas chambers, the Gulag Archipelago, in the streets and the fields, in artificially induced famine, in POW camps. The Holocaust was an attempt to exterminate a whole people, a true genocide. It would be most unfair to say that all that horror followed from the mismanaged peace at the end of the First World War, but by sowing discord between nations related in language or history made it easier for two large and several smaller dictators to climb to power and to be responsible for the death of so many of their countrymen as well as their alleged enemies.

For Jews, communists and anti-communist opponents of Nazism liberation was brought by the Soviet Army, but it was accompanied by atrocities which immediately alienated most of the liberated peoples from Soviet communism. Looting, rape and occasional murder was not restricted to soldiers, Soviet, German and others. Civilians, even civil servants participated in them, for which many, but not all, had to answer after the war. They paid by their life or long imprisonment. Sadly the tribulations did not come to an end with the termination of the war. Towards its end there were mutual persecutions and murders between Poles and Ukrainians, Serbs and Croats and Slovenes, Germans and Czechs, and even the suffering of the Jews did not stop immediately. The expulsion of the Germans (not all war criminals) from Soviet Russia, Poland and Czechoslovakia, even some from Hungary and Romania, was carried out often by most cruel methods. The „Benes Decrees” in 1945 deprived the Germans and Hungarians of Czechoslovakia of all civil rights and properties. Poland was pushed westward on the map and that involved uprooting millions. After peace was signed (again in Paris) in 1947, communism was equally imposed on the Poles, who resisted the Nazis heroically, and on the satellites of Germany. First it was accompanied by robbery called „nationalization,” then terror, and the proclaimed internationalism turned into „red nationalism” (particularly in Ceausescu’s Romania). Many people fled to the West. The consolidation of “the dictatorship of the proletariat” was followed by protests and uprisings: Berlin (1953), Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968) bringing in “the Brezhnev doctrine” which justified Soviet intervention, and Poland incessantly, but particularly in 1976 and 1980–81. They whole 20th century in the eastern half of Europe was rightly described in 1946 by the prominent Hungarian scholar-politician Bibó: „The misery of the East European small states.”⁵

5 István Bibó, Democracy, Revolution, Self-Determination. Ed. by Károly Nagy. Boulder: Social Science Monographs, 1991. 13–86.

With the peaceful ending of the Cold War and Communism the terrible 20th century came to a happy ending in Central Europe. The ensuing hardships of the transition and the disappointments dwarf in comparison to what the peoples of Central Europe had to go through in the “short” 20th century. Only the national minorities, who did not cross the borders but whom the borders crossed over, did not find the peace and calm they expected from democracy. Ever since their appearance in the wake of World War I they sought and received support from the kin state, the “mother country.” Nevertheless they were steadily losing ground, and the mass murders during World War II, followed by millions expelled took a heavy toll in their numbers. One example:



In spite of the reduction in their number and even more their proportion in the overall population the national minorities are determined to survive. The tolerant atmosphere and legal arrangements seen in Western Europe and the various international conventions, especially those adopted by the Council of Europe give them modest hope.

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So what are the conclusions, „lessons” from history? How “the apple of Eris” worked in East-Central Europe in the last hundred years? It is beyond doubt that unfair borders led to lasting conflicts, helping the aggressive dictators. The protection of the national minorities was insufficient and inadequate. Human rights are essential, but they have to include minority rights as well. The developments in Western Europe, the reconciliation of the nations and countries offer a model to be followed in the eastern half of the continent, too.

Economic integration followed by political, the „four liberties” of the European Union, the „Schengen” system of free movement of peoples is the solution to the border and minority problems, eliminating “the apple of Eris” which the First World War and the peace treaties tossed into the midst of Europe a hundred years ago.

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Яблоко раздора: политические последствия мирных договоров 1918–1920 гг.

Автор. Геза Есенски – историк по образованию, преподавал в Университете Корвинус в Будапеште. Был министром иностранных дел Венгрии (1990–1994), послом в США (1998–2002), в Норвегии и Исландии (2011–2014).

Аннотация. В статье автор анализирует историю Центральной Европы от распада Австро-Венгрии, когда, собственно, и появилось это политico-географическое понятие, и до наших дней. Появление на послевоенной карте новых государств не привело к умиротворению народов и установлению долгосрочного мира в регионе, скорее, наоборот, стало причиной новых продолжительных конфликтов и вражды, дало возможность крупным державам решать за счет малых государств свои geopolитические задачи. В свою очередь, центральноевропейские государства, возникшие на месте крупнейшей империи Европы, начали возлагать надежды на внешние державы в надежде на удержание или на преодоление установленвшегося статус-кво. К этническим факторам примешивались экономические, приведшие к значительному снижению уровня жизни центральноевропейцев. На этом фоне быстро усиливавшаяся экономически Германия давала некоторым лидерам надежды на преодоление отставания, выглядела перспективным союзником, вселяла надежды на разрешение политических проблем. Однако за поражением Германии во Второй мировой войне последовала расплата за союзничество, откат к границам 1920 г. Установившиеся здесь коммунистические режимы вновь погрузили регион в проблемы. И только после вхождения в Европейский союз и в Шенген, по мнению автора, у народов появилась надежда на преодоление несправедливости, довлевшей над этой частью Европы почти 100 лет.

Ключевые слова: Центральная Европа, национальные меньшинства, границы, Трианонский договор, послевоенное урегулирование.