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Setting the Record Straight on Hungary's History

AHF Responds to Article in Foreign Policy

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“Hungary faces an epistemological problem that all medium-size and small countries face in international politics. Most people – including most journalists and most opinion-formers – know very little about them. . . . They have no good basis for any opinions they may hold about those countries.” So writes John O’Sullivan, Editor-at-Large of *National Review* and a former Special Adviser to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

This truism manifests itself in numerous articles, comments and judgments about Hungary and Central and Eastern Europe. James Traub’s article, “Hungary’s 500-Year-Old Victim Complex,” *FP*, October 28, is an example of O’Sullivan’s observation. The overarching argument of the article is that Hungarians falsify the past to use it as an instrument of the present. The article itself,

however, is punctuated with sweeping generalities and omits important historical facts, resulting in a distorted picture of Hungary and the character of its people. A couple of examples will suffice.

“Hungarians share a collective pathology known as the “Trianon syndrome,” asserts the article. Ever since Trianon, according to the article, Hungarians allegedly have resented the fact that they no longer matter.

But what is the real issue? The peace Treaty of Trianon (diktat according to some) following the First World War was arguably the most severe of all the post-World War I settlements. Ostensibly in the name of national self-determination, the Treaty dismembered the thousand-year-old Kingdom of Hungary, a self-contained, geographically and economically coherent and durable formation in the Carpathian Basin and boasting the longest lasting historical borders in Europe. It was imposed on Hungary without any negotiation by vengeful leaders who were ignorant or ignored the region’s history. They mercilessly tore that country apart, overlooking the fact that Hungary was an unwilling partner to the Central Powers. By drawing artificial borders in gross violation of the ethnic principle, it also transferred over three million indigenous ethnic Hungarians and over 70% of the country’s territory to foreign rule. The peacemakers even denied the affected populations the right to choose under whose sovereignty they would live.

One can imagine how Americans would react to such a calamity. Today it is the lingering consequences of that treaty that concern Hungarians and human rights advocates, not resentment.

It is worth noting that Hungary is not the only nation that has been wronged by the major powers in the last two centuries. Russia, Prussia and Austria partitioned Poland three times in the 18th century until the state of Poland ceased to exist. The Polish Republic was only restored on November 11, 1918. Nevertheless its national spirit lived on - so too the national spirit of the dismembered part of Hungary continues as a viable part of Hungarian nationhood and culture.

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The Hungarian historical communities living in the Successor States, however, are denied a range of rights, including cultural or territorial autonomy, and are forced to live in a stifling *status quo* that threatens their cultural existence, if not their very survival.

They are denied even internal self-determination, such that would enable them to exercise a degree of local self-rule and preserve their unique culture and identity within existing borders. Importantly, the Hungarians of Serbia, Slovakia, Romania, and Ukraine have all demanded autonomy by peaceful and democratic means. Autonomy would ensure democracy to beleaguered Hungarians, fulfill promises made to them ninety-five years ago, and strengthen the democratic process by serving as a model of how majorities and minorities can work together to redress past wrongs.

It is time to bury Trianon by extending democracy to Hungarians in place of their current status as second-class citizens in their homeland. As soon they are able to enjoy the fruits of genuine democracy, Trianon will at long last be relegated to the history books. Yet the article is silent about this solution.

Another example of the incomplete nature of the article is its treatment of Hungarians and the Holocaust. Without referring to any facts relating to that tragic and dark period of Hungary's history, the article inaccurately asserts that Hungary was a "willing participant in the Final Solution." It fails to mention that on March 19, 1944 – a time by which millions of Jews from other countries throughout Europe had been murdered and near the end of the war – 800,000 Jews were living in Hungary who believed they would be spared the fate of other Jews in Europe. As Professor Joseph Rothschild of Columbia University noted, "Jews though economically and socially molested, were shielded from extermination."

The article also fails to mention that although nominal allies, Hungary refused to deport Jews to the German death camps despite constant pressure from Hitler. There was no Hungarian "willingness," except for a radical fringe, to deport Jews.* A diary entry by Joseph Goebbels on May 8, 1943 following a meeting between Horthy and Hitler points to Hungary's unwillingness to participate in the Final Solution as long as it was able to retain a modicum of sovereignty:

"The Jewish question is being solved least satisfactorily by the Hungarians. The Hungarian state is permeated with Jews, and the Fuehrer did not succeed during his talk with Horthy in convincing the latter of the necessity of more stringent measures. Horthy himself, of course, is badly tangled up with the Jews through his family, and will continue to resist every effort to tackle the Jewish problem aggressively. He gave a number of humanitarian counterarguments which of course don't apply at all to this situation. You just cannot talk humanitarianism when dealing with Jews. Jews must be defeated."



March 19, 1944, the day an exasperated Hitler occupied Hungary changed everything and had catastrophic consequences for the Jews; 550,000 Jews were deported to Hitler's death camps by the German Nazis and the Hungarian authorities.

The roles of Germans and Hungarians in the Holocaust are summarized by Professor Randolph Braham, a specialist of that period, as follows, "[w]hile the Germans were eager to solve the Jewish question, they could not have proceeded without the consent of the newly established [Sztójay] puppet government and the cooperation of the Hungarian instrumentalities of power. The Hungarian ultra-rightists,

in turn ... could not have achieved their ideologically defined objectives in the absence of the [German] occupation."

Ignoring the German role is as unacceptable as are attempts to whitewash the Hungarian role in the Holocaust. Indeed, the bare bones “willingness” assertion is incomplete history that presents a grotesquely distorted picture of Hungarians.

Disregarding history in this manner hardly provides the intellectual underpinnings for an understanding of and an effective foreign policy toward Hungary.

*There were pre-invasion atrocities. Germans murdered Jews expelled by Hungarian authorities at Kamenets-Podolsk. The deportations were halted by Hungary’s Interior Minister when he learned of the murders. Following the Novi Sad massacre, the perpetrators were prosecuted by the Kallay government, fled to Berlin and returned to Hungary with the occupying German army.