



National Press Building #809
Washington D.C. 20045
(202) 737-0127

www.americanhungarianfederation.org / www.hungary1956.com

Overdue Autonomy for Minority Hungarians!

Time to Bury Trianon and Resurrect Democracy

Frank Koszorus, Jr.

American Hungarian Federation

June 4, 2008

Eighty-eight years ago 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, was dismembered by the Treaty of Trianon. Although invoking the principle of self-determination, the victorious peacemakers ignored that much-vaunted principle when it came to extending it also to Hungary and the Hungarian nation. Not even Count Apponyi, leader of Hungary's peace delegation, could move them to apply self-determination also to Hungarians. As he pled to the Supreme Council of the Paris Peace Conference:

In the name of the great principle so happily phrased by President Wilson, namely that no group of people, no population, may be transferred from one State to another without being consulted,- as though they were a herd of cattle with no will of their own,- in the name of this great principle, an axiom of good sense and public morals, we request, we demand a plebiscite on those parts of Hungary that are now on the point of being severed from us. I declare we are willing to bow to the decision of a plebiscite whatever it should be. Of course, we demand it should be held in conditions ensuring the freedom of the vote.

This eloquent, desperate yet fully justified plea fell on deaf ears as the peacemakers permitted only the city of Sopron in western Hungary to decide its future by a plebiscite -- it opted by a large margin to remain in Hungary. With this one exception, the peace-makers imposed exceptionally punitive terms on Hungary without any negotiation and mercilessly tore that country apart. They drew artificial borders in gross violation of the ethnic principle and transferred over three million indigenous ethnic Hungarians and over 70% of the country's territory to foreign rule.

The European order imposed after World War I and then re-imposed following the Second World War collapsed almost within months at the end of the Cold War. One ethnic group after another throughout the region seized the opportunity to realize their own objectives to exercise external self-determination, even as some of them denied internal self-determination to their Hungarian co-nationals. For example, after Slovakia broke away from Prague's perceived dominance in the peaceful divorce of 1992, it wasted little time to gerrymander the country's historic administrative division in 1996 so as to eliminate most of the districts which had a Hungarian majority population.*

After some of the bloodiest conflicts and ethnic cleansing throughout the Balkans since World War II, Slovenians, Croatians, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Kosovars and Albanians escaped Belgrade's stranglehold. All of these peoples – many of them beneficiaries of Trianon – succeeded in exercising the right of external self-determination, proclaim their independence, and radically change the map of Central and Eastern Europe. Ironically, Trianon had been dismantled in the name of self-determination, except as that ill-conceived and grossly punitive treaty affected the Hungarians.

Only the Hungarian historical communities living in the newly divided post Cold War, post-Trianon successor states 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. Consequently, not only would autonomy ensure democracy to beleaguered Hungarian national communities and fulfill a promise made to them eighty-eight years ago, it would also strengthen the democratic process by serving as an exemplary model of how majorities and minorities can work together to redress past wrongs. It would also defuse tensions caused by violations of human and minority rights.

It is time at long-last to bury Trianon also for Hungarians by extending to them genuine democracy through autonomy in place of their current status as second-class citizens in their homeland. As the former chairman of the National Intelligence Council at the CIA observed nearly a decade ago,** “We are talking about . . . the willingness of minorities . . . to put up with gross misgovernance in a world rife with talk of democratization, globalization, civil society, nongovernmental organizations, human rights and growing U.N. norms. How long can we expect that minorities will indefinitely accept unacceptable status quos?”

The Hungarian national communities living in countries neighboring “Trianon Hungary” should not be expected to wait any longer for their turn to enjoy the fruits of genuine democracy and their own autonomy. These very countries have largely dismantled Trianon because it was in their own self interest and not that of their co-nationals, the indigenous founding nation, the Hungarians. Now the task must be completed and the Hungarians’ legitimate and democratically asserted but heretofore ignored demands for autonomy must be granted.

*See The Federation’s statement and materials relating to the Benes Decrees which shamefully imposed collective guilt on the Hungarian population of Czechoslovakia at the end of the Second World War and which continue to adversely affect Hungarians of Slovakia. www.americanhungarianfederation.org/news_benesdecrees.htm

**Graham Fuller, “More Kosovos,” *The Washington Post*, (May 4, 1999).
