



The American Hungarian Federation

FOUNDED 1906

VOJVODINA: “Drop dead Hungarians”

In the last six months, non-Serbs, including members of Vojvodina’s 300,000-strong Hungarian minority, have been harassed and assaulted and their cemeteries and churches have been desecrated in a wave of physical violence, vandalism and anti-Semitism.



“When the Setets family set off this morning to take their 13-year-old daughter to school, they got a shock. As they left their small, two-room house on the outskirts of Subotica, in northern Serbia, they found a 15-inch kitchen knife embedded in their front door. Alongside it, someone had sprayed the Serbian word for ‘death’ in red. Further to the right was ‘Drop dead Hungarians.’” *The New York Times*, September 16, 2004.

Thirteen Members of Congress, including members of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus and the Hungarian American Caucus, reportedly wrote to the Prime Minister of Serbia and Montenegro, Vojislav Kostunica, in July to express their concern relating to the anti-Hungarian violence in Vojvodina.



Throughout this wave of violence and intolerance, the Serbian authorities have turned a blind eye to these hate crimes. This moved Congressman Tom Lantos, a co-chair of the Hungarian American Caucus, on July 9, 2004 to urge Prime Minister Kostunica to



“take immediate action to curb those Serbian elements in Vojvodina which are targeting Hungarian and other minorities as scapegoats. It is important that the Government of Serbia vigorously investigate and prosecute the criminal elements responsible for these hate crimes. Government leaders, under your direction, should undertake a high profile campaign to condemn anti-minority hostilities and restore the centuries-old spirit of inter-ethnic harmony.”

Unfortunately, neither has there been a high profile campaign nor have the perpetrators been brought to justice.

Vojvodina is one of two provinces in the Republic of Serbia, which along with Montenegro forms Serbia and Montenegro. Vojvodina occupies the northern one-fifth (8,348 sq. miles) of the country’s territory, bordering Hungary in the north, Croatia in the west, Bosnia-Herzegovina in the southwest, Serbia proper in the south, and Rumania in the east. The province has 2.2 million inhabitants of which 57 percent are Serbs, 17 percent Hungarians, 5 percent Croats, 3 percent Slovaks, 2 percent Montenegrins, 2 percent Rumanians, 1 percent Ruthenians, and 13 percent others. These numbers are based on the 1991 census and have likely changed during the Balkan wars in the 1990’s.



Prior to World War I Vojvodina was part of Hungary for approximately 1,100 years, with the exception of 200 years of Turkish occupation (1526-1699/1718). That occupation resulted in the depopulation of the area. Thereafter, the Habsburgs began to repopulate the area with German and Serb settlers and the Hungarians also began to resettle in the region. In 1910 the 1,320,000 inhabitants included 30.2 percent Hungarians, 25 percent Serbs, 23 percent Swabian Germans, 10 percent other South Slavs (including Croats, Bunjevci, Sokci), and 10 percent others (Romanians, Slovaks, Ruthenians). It is unlikely that this region would have become part of Yugoslavia had Woodrow Wilson's principle of self-determination been respected. It was not and the Paris peace treaties awarded Vojvodina to the newly created Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (renamed Yugoslavia in 1929).

The Serbs began an aggressive Serbianization process that, among other things, radically altered Vojvodina's ethnic composition in the 20th century. As soon as Vojvodina was transferred to Yugoslavia, they moved tens of thousands of Serb families into Vojvodina, dispossessing the original residents. This was repeated after World War II when twenty to thirty-five thousand Hungarian men and boys were massacred between October and December 1944. An additional 40-50,000 Hungarians fled this terror.

A third wave of "ethnic cleansing" took place under Milosevic: tens of thousands of Serb families poured in from Kosovo, Croatia, and Bosnia, while some hundred thousand Hungarians and Croats fled the forced mobilization and intimidation. The ethnic structure of Vojvodina has thus been significantly altered -- international treaties notwithstanding -- through forced or state-sponsored relocation, in favor of the Serbs, as noted above.

In the 1988 Milosevic Serbian parliament, supported by populists rallies financed by Serb nationalists, destroyed the province's autonomy when it illegitimately overturned the 1974 Yugoslav Constitution, which guaranteed legislative, executive, and judicial powers to both Vojvodina and Kosovo. As noted by the March 15, 2001 RFE/RL Newline, "destroying the two provinces' autonomy was an important step in the consolidation of Milosevic's power." For Vojvodina this has resulted in domination by Belgrade and loss of the right to local self-government.

Despite years of intimidation, Vojvodinians consistently and peacefully voted against Milosevic, demonstrating their deep commitment to democracy. Milosevic is gone and on trial for war crimes. The decimated minorities and those Serbs whose historical roots are in Vojvodina are still waiting for the restoration of autonomy, both territorial for the province (indeed, legislative, executive, and judicial) and "personal" autonomy (in education, the media, publishing, and cultural institutions) for members of the ethnic minorities. They are still waiting for the intolerance to stop, the xenophobia to vanish, and the criminals to be brought to justice.

Frank Koszorus, Jr.
First Vice-President, AHF
October 30, 2004