

The Innocence of Article Eighteen, Paragraph Two, Subsection E.

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The status law as originally conceived is a thing of the past. The Office for Hungarian Minorities Abroad now refers to it as the *Kedvezménytörvény* (Benefit Law), reflecting the way in which the 2001 original law was substantially amended in June 2003 to address many of the Venice Commission's criticisms. In addition, bilateral agreements were signed between Hungary and Slovakia (eventually) and Hungary and Romania (with greater alacrity), the two neighbouring countries most affected by Hungary's unilateral initiative. These bilateral agreements addressed one of the most fundamental criticisms of the Venice Commission, namely that the Law was implemented unilaterally and in a way that compromised friendly relations between countries. But the status law is not dead as a subject of intellectual enquiry. As its claims were at once breath-taking and yet interpreted by so many as being entirely unproblematic, the political climate that gave birth to them warrants further investigation. This paper attempts to do this through the lens of one of the Law's most extravagant provisions, entirely excised from the amended 2003 version, which indicated that Hungary should be able to intervene in the rural development policy of its neighbouring countries (Article 18, paragraph (2) subsection (e)).

The Hungarian Status Law has stimulated extensive academic discussion, not least the volume edited by Zoltán Kántor and others.¹ The upshot of this analysis, taken primarily from a reading of the contributions to that volume and the Venice Commission report, can be categorised as follows:

- 1) the Status Law was not unique. Many other very similar laws existed and had been passed at more or less the same time.

¹ Zoltán Kántor et al. (eds.), *The Hungarian Status Law: Nation Building and/or Minority Protection* (Slavic Eurasian Studies no. 4; Sapporo, 2004).

2) it set no extreme precedents in terms of its intrusiveness, although its intrusiveness taken together with the lack of consultation about its introduction was unusual and constituted the main grounds of the criticism by the Council of Europe's Venice Commission.

3) nevertheless it was highly controversial in fact. Whether justified or not, the law proved to be extremely controversial.

4) the Hungarian reaction was cries of injured innocence when the controversy erupted; they could not understand what was controversial about modest plans to improve the fate of their ethnic kin.

Thus, two sets of people saw the law as unproblematic, international legal experts and the Hungarian politicians who implemented it. But they did so for different reasons. For the international legal experts, their surprise at the fury which the law engendered was a function of their ignorance of the history of the region, their failure to recognise that there can be little innocence in ethnic relations in this part of the globe. The surprise on the part of the implementers of the law, together with the volume of the criticism that the law provoked, was the result not of ignorance of the history of the region but of total immersion in it, or rather in the historical myths of national victimhood that it had produced. The implementers failed to see problems, while the opponents saw nothing but problems because of the lenses of national myth through which they viewed events.

In this essay, the nature of these myths of national victimhood will be considered in relation to an obscure paragraph in the law which is instructive because it reveals how easy it is for those who observe the world through the lens of a myth of national victimhood to slip from the uncontested to the inherently problematic.

I. Article 18, Paragraph (2) Subsection (e)

It is best to place the above-mentioned element of the status law in the context of Article 18 as a whole, the official English wording of which (as used by the Venice Commission) is as follows:

Article 18

(1) The Republic of Hungary shall support organisations operating in neighbouring countries and promoting the goals of the Hungarian

national communities living in neighbouring countries.

(2) The organisations specified in paragraph (1) may apply to the public benefit organisation established for this purpose and operating in a lawful manner if their goals include, in particular, the following:

- a) the preservation, furtherance and research of Hungarian national traditions,
- b) the preservation and fostering of the Hungarian language, literature, culture and folk arts,
- c) the promotion of higher education of Hungarians living abroad by facilitating the work of instructors from Hungary as visiting lecturers,
- d) the restoration and maintenance of monuments belonging to the Hungarian cultural heritage,
- e) the enhancement of the capacity of disadvantaged settlements in areas inhabited by Hungarian national communities living abroad to improve their ability to preserve their population and to develop rural tourism,
- f) the establishment and improvement of conditions of infrastructure for maintaining contacts with the Republic of Hungary,
- g) the pursuance of other activities promoting the goals specified in paragraph (1).

There is an apparently seamless progression here providing ever more concrete forms of support for ethnic kin. But at the same time, it becomes ever more intrusive into areas which most states would see as concerns of their own sovereign policy. The first two provisions are unexceptional. Promoting the preservation, furtherance, and research of national traditions is something few would take exception to, and the same is true of the preservation and fostering of the Hungarian language, literature, culture and folk arts. Nor is there much exceptional about the third provision on facilitating the work of instructors and visiting lecturers. The British Council, the Alliance Française, and the Goethe Institute perform analogous activities. On the other hand, the reference to higher education does presuppose that institutions of higher education in the Hungarian language in the neighbouring countries do in fact exist. The paragraph is in danger of insisting that they should exist, which is a decision for the sovereign state.

By the fourth provision, culture has been made physical and extended to the restoration and maintenance of monuments belonging to the

Hungarian cultural heritage. There are many examples of foreign institutions helping maintain monuments in another country, of course, such as the British War Graves Commission. But these were not introduced without consultation, and the very physicality of monuments of the cultural heritage, rather than culture in the abstract, impacts directly on all members of the population, ethnic majority and ethnic minority alike. The majority population will see these monuments, they will not be able to ignore them in the way that they might Hungarian folk dancing classes. The promotion of physical manifestations of culture is inherently more intrusive and warrants consultation.

In the fifth subsection, the one which this essay has taken as its theme, a further step has been taken. Supporting culture and education and then the physical manifestations of culture is taken a step further to become supporting the economic basis that sustains people of that culture. The Hungarian government is claiming the right to intervene in local economic development policy in disadvantaged settlements populated by ethnic Hungarians using the standard tool of rural development in such areas—rural tourism. Rural development by the time that the law was introduced had become the ‘second pillar’ of Europe’s Common Agricultural Policy and all countries of the region were adjusting their agricultural and rural policies to conform to its principles. Hungary was thus asserting the right to influence, in neighbouring states and for selected minority communities only, national policies which impending EU membership effectively obliged all countries to implement.

The sixth provision is even more breath-taking in its claim, but so outlandish as to be dismissed as a realistic aim. Quite what ‘conditions of infrastructure for maintaining contacts with the Republic of Hungary’ are in reality is uncertain. Infrastructure investments are by their very nature not specific. Roads, telephones, computers, the internet, satellite receivers can be used by all to communicate with anyone, not just with the Republic of Hungary. The provision was either meaningless, or in effect was simply an extension of the previous provision on rural development policy, namely improving rural infrastructure or perhaps promoting telecottages.

A key word in the Venice Commission’s verdict on the status law is ‘disproportionate’—the rights claimed unilaterally by Hungary were disproportionate to the extent of interference without consultation into the affairs of a sovereign state. Article 18 reflects well how the proportionate easily slips into the disproportionate. Unobjectionable measures become

by degree direct intervention into central components of the economic policy of a sovereign state. Promoting cultural diversity becomes interfering in economic policy. What is of interest to this paper is: how could this slippage take place? How could politicians either not be aware of this policy slippage, or not care that it was happening?

The answer has to be located in unidimensional and selective visions of relations with neighbouring states refracted through national myths of victimhood. That international relations are conducted within the context of national myths is not unusual or unique to Europe east of the Elbe. Most nations are sustained by a set of national myths. But what is different about this region of Europe is that national myths are defined in terms of mistreatment by neighbours, and a mistreatment that is underpinned by no rationale other than oppression. You cannot be a nationalist without simultaneously bearing grudges against neighbouring nations for a set of cruelties that defy reason. This sense of victimhood at the hands of the non-reasoning other leads to a dehumanising of the 'other' (the peoples and governments of the surrounding nations), the rejection of them as negotiating partners, and the verdict that if they cannot act reasonably, 'we' should act for them.

Hugh Seton-Watson in his classic account of *Eastern Europe between the Wars* was especially critical of the practice of history and how it filtered into the educational syllabus:

Emphasis was laid on History, and particularly on the heroic medieval periods in which each Eastern European nation had for a brief span of years dominated its neighbours. [...] The youth of each nation was taught to regard its neighbours as inferior to itself in culture, moral values and courage. [...] in the schools the poorly trained teachers were hardly able to give their pupils more than a grounding in the 'three R's' and a conviction that chauvinism is the highest civic virtue.²

It would be wrong to say that nothing has changed in the interim, but a tendency towards one-sided accounts persists. Even as authoritative an account of the Trianon Treaty as that presented by Ignác Romsics is open to criticism. First, there is only oblique reference to Hungary's policy of

² Hugh Seton-Watson, *Eastern Europe between the Wars, 1918–1941*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1967 [Cambridge, 1945]), p. 141.

‘magyarization’ in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and thus minimal explanation of why Hungary’s minorities felt a sense of grievance. There is an indirect reference to *magyarosító* policies when he states that Hungarian politicians opposed moves for greater autonomy,³ and discussions of negotiations with Romania to revise and relax *magyarosító* educational policies,⁴ but no explanation of what they were, no mention of the 1879 education act⁵ or the Kindergarten Act of 1891 (see below), or the fact that Hungarian officialdom remained intransigent to minority claims even as late as 1918,⁶ nor indeed does he consider whether the former minorities welcomed the return of Hungarian government between 1938 and 1941.⁷ Second, there is a tendency towards inferences which are unsubstantiated by the statistics quoted. In the two most disputed regions, Transylvania and Czechoslovakia, the largest figure he can arrive at for the share of Hungarians in the dispossessed regions is around 30 per cent.⁸ The Romanians and Czechs did try to manipulate statistics in their favour, and Romsics is right to point this out.⁹ But to anyone not already predisposed to allocate such territory to Hungary, a 30 per cent share of the population living there does not constitute *prima facie* a strong claim to it. To Romsics it is self-evidently an injustice,¹⁰ but whether this is because these whole regions were lost or because wholly ethnically Hungarian settlements near their borders were lost remains ambiguous.

But the most important issue concerning myths is not the academic history writing that only a small minority of the population reads, it is the popularised history of everyday life. The rest of this article will thus be devoted to analysing two texts in the public domain which perpetuate these myths of national victimhood at the hands of unreasoning neighbours. The first, more extensive analysis, is the historical

³ Ignác Romsics, *A Trianoni Békeszerződés* (Budapest, 2001), p. 26.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 28.

⁵ László Katus (ed.), *Magyarország Története 1848–1890* (Budapest, 1987), p. 1343.

⁶ Joseph Rothschild, *East Central Europe between the Two World Wars* (Seattle, 1974), p. 138.

⁷ Romsics, *op. cit.*, p. 235. See also: Michael Stewart, ‘The Hungarian Status Law: a New European Form of Transnational Politics?’ in Kántor et al. (eds.), pp. 127–128.

⁸ Romsics, *op. cit.*, pp. 110, 112, 230, 232.

⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 110–112.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 237.

background section (covering the inter war and immediate post war periods) to the report on the website of the Office for Hungarian Minorities Abroad on the situation of Hungarians in Slovakia. The second is the text of a Slovak memorial on the side of a building in Bratislava which refers to historical events when Slovakia was a part of Hungary.

II. The Hungarians in Slovakia through Hungarian Eyes

The whole of the text on Slovakia cannot be reproduced in full for reasons of space, but can be viewed at <<http://www.htmh.hu/jelentesek2004/szlovakia2004.htm>>. Here selected sections are translated and analysed.

The second sentence of the text goes to the heart of Hungarian national perceptions:

Until then [1918] their [ethnic Hungarian] political, economic, cultural and national being had been identical with the unified Hungarian nation.

But they had not been part of a ‘unified Hungarian nation’. The Hungarian part of the Dual-Monarchy had been a multi-ethnic state, even if Hungarian politicians liked to see it as Hungarian and pursued policies to magyarize it as fast as possible. Hungarians did not constitute even 50 per cent of the geo-political unit administered by the Hungarian state.¹¹ The ‘being’ of the new minority Hungarians had not been identical with a unified Hungarian nation, it had been identical with the being of Hungarians living in a united nation state, dominated by Hungarians, the only ‘political nation’, overlords over the other ‘nationalities’ or national minorities.

The third sentence introduces a further complication:

Citing the right to self-government of the fictional “Czechoslovak” nation, the great powers created Czechoslovakia as a multi-ethnic state.

A lot is left unpacked here. The idea of Czechoslovak ethnic identity was relatively new in 1918, and its robustness was found wanting in 1993;

¹¹ Ibid. p. 10.

more important, it was used to legitimise the creation of Czechoslovakia because the great powers would not have countenanced the creation of another multi-ethnic state. In fact the new state was multi-ethnic, and realistically could hardly have been otherwise. There was dishonesty in the claim that Czechoslovakia was an ethnically homogeneous state, but not so much because of the weakness of the Czechoslovak idea as because of the presence of Germans and Hungarians. The overall effect of the word ‘fictional’, however, is to suggest that Hungarians were not just victims, but victims of an unreal entity.

The third paragraph of the text states the following:

In 1919 Czechoslovakia signed up to its obligation under the Saint Germain-en-Lay treaty to protect minority rights, but the government consistently violated it.

It omits to say that Hungary had not respected minority rights during the period of the Monarchy, that interwar Hungary did not respect minority rights in respect of Germans any better than Slovakia between the wars,¹² and that none of the other new East European countries created in 1918 implemented minority rights provisions. Hungarians in Slovakia suffered from discrimination, of course, but no more so than any other minority in the region.

The text continues:

As a consequence of this [the non-respecting of minority rights] up to the end of December 1920, 105,000 Hungarians were obliged to leave Czechoslovakia, the majority of whom were dismissed Hungarian civil servants, teachers, military officers and landowners who had lost their lands, as well as those who refused to take the oath of allegiance required by the new government.

It is presented as if it were self-evidently a matter of grievance, but it is difficult to see wherein precisely the grievance lies. In the context of Hungary’s earlier aggressive magyarization policies, it is not surprising that the new state attempted to replace officials and educationalists with ethnic kin. That the policy backfired in as much as there were insufficient

¹² Rothschild, *op. cit.*, pp. 193–194.

non-magyarophone Slovaks available and the Hungarians and Hungarian-speakers had to be replaced by Czechs is another story.¹³ The requirement of an oath of allegiance is similarly not surprising given the history of magyarization and insecure status of new state, and the text fails to mention that the requirement was imposed on more minor officials only after postal and railway strikes organised in Budapest attempted to sever links between Slovakia and Bohemia.¹⁴

The text continues:

The authorities did not give citizenship to 45,000 Hungarians, and many tens of thousands were forced to abandon their homes, thus by 1930 Hungarians whose forebears had lived there since the historical Middle Ages disappeared from almost 200 villages and small towns.

What is of interest here is the reference to having lived there since the Middle Ages. Its inclusion serves no purpose other than to heighten the sense of injustice. The Slovaks had lived there for just as long.

Next we are told:

In order to break up ethnically uniform Hungarian territories the settlement of Czech and Slovak populations was begun.

There can be little doubt that the Slovak government was interested in reducing the number of homogeneous Hungarian areas. On the other hand, given the extent of rural poverty, the lands could hardly be left unsettled or redistributed between the existing population; and, given the context of earlier magyarization, it would be unlikely that they would invite in Hungarians from Hungary. The policy was at least as much indirectly as it was directly anti-Hungarian.

The land reform is considered at more length in the next sentence:

During the course of the land reform, Hungarian properties of over 250 hectares were confiscated and distributed between Czech and Slovak settlers. Thus between 1922 and 1938 70 villages inhabited by Czechs

¹³ C.A. Macartney, *Hungary and her Successors: the Treaty of Trianon and its Consequences 1919–1937* (London, 1937), pp. 111, 114–115, 119–120.

¹⁴ Macartney, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

and Slovaks were created on territories which had previously been inhabited by Hungarians.

The land reform is presented as an anti-Hungarian measure, but it was only anti-Hungarian because the large landowners in the new Slovakia were Hungarians. In the Czech lands they were German, and if there had been any Czech or Slovak landed gentry, they too would have suffered from the land reform (although perhaps less dramatically—in Romania the land reform was noticeably less radical in areas where the landed classes were ethnically Romanian).¹⁵ The claim that only Czechs and Slovaks benefited from the Land Reform is also not clear-cut. The biggest beneficiaries were those who acquired the ‘residual estates’. A great number of these were people who, it was felt, had served the Czechoslovak state well, or, more cynically, were close to the Agrarian Party.¹⁶ Ethnic Hungarians were not likely to figure in this category. As for the failure of Hungarians to benefit from the standard redistribution, an account which is sympathetic to the Czechoslovak viewpoint maintains as follows:

It is claimed that the Magyars did not benefit in the same degree as the Slovaks by the Land Reform. To the limited extent to which this claim is justified, the blame should be attached, however, not to the Czechoslovak government, but to the priests and other agents of Budapest, who advised the Magyars not to take advantage of the measure, telling them that it would shortly be annulled when the Hungarian administration was restored, and that those who ignored their advice would then be treated as traitors.¹⁷

Finally, the paragraph concludes:

¹⁵ For the different land reform policies in the different component parts of Romania, see: David Mitrany, *The Land and the Peasant in Rumania* (London, 1930). For a general account of interwar land reforms, see: Iván T. Berend, ‘Agriculture’, in M.C. Kaser and E.A. Radice (eds.), *The Economic History of Eastern Europe 1919–1975 Volume I: Economic Structure and Performance between the Two Wars* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 152–162.

¹⁶ Edgar P. Young, *Czechoslovakia* (London, 1938), pp. 139–140 who terms them ‘remnant farms’.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 222.

The structures of local administration were changed from 1 January 1923. The purpose of the creation of the large counties and their north-south orientation was that in as few places as possible should the Hungarian population constitute a majority, so that they did not have to be provided with the right to use their language. Towns were down graded to large villages so that the elected self-governments of villages could be discontinued.

Again, the picture is incomplete and designed to heighten a sense of grievance. It is not unnatural that some reform of the local administration should take place given the different borders and the truncation of some existing counties. On 1 January 1923 Slovakia introduced six *Župy* and subordinate districts, the only part actually implemented of a plan introduced on 29 February 1920 to create 21 *Župy* throughout Slovakia. Although both *Župy* and districts had elected assemblies, central government also appointed advisors who were also able to vote and the administration was mainly in the hands of nominated officials, while the *Župan* presided over meetings of the Assembly. The bodies thus had less freedom of action than the old Hungarian counties, but they were elected on the basis of a much larger franchise. The free boroughs of the Hungarian system, with their equally restricted franchise, also lost their special status and were brought under the *Župy* system.¹⁸ The Hungarians lost at least as much privileged status as they did human rights. No reference is made in contemporary accounts that I have been able to access to the north-south axis. This was certainly an issue in the 1990s when Mečiar reformed the local administration again. One wonders why Mečiar felt it was necessary some seventy and more years later if it been successfully implemented in 1923. There may be an element of confusion here.

A paragraph and a half later, decisions have been reversed:

This was followed by the so-called First Vienna Award on the basis of which the areas with Hungarian minorities were reattached to Hungary. With the Vienna Award of the November of 1938, 11,927 square kilometres of land and 869,299 inhabitants (86.5 per cent Hungarian speaking) came to Hungary.

¹⁸ Macartney, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

Here what is noteworthy is the silences—what is not said about the 13.5 per cent inhabitants of these territories who were not Hungarian and for whom Hungary did not implement the minorities provisions of the Peace Treaty any more consistently than had the Slovaks; about the occupation with no international sanction, not even the questionable one of the Vienna Award, of parts of Ruthenia (then part of Czechoslovakia), an area which was of greater strategic than linguistic importance;¹⁹ and about the subsequent forced border revision with the smaller Slovakia in Hungary's favour.²⁰ Aggressive actions on the part of Hungary do not sit well with the mythology of victimhood and are brushed under the carpet.

The text continues:

A total of 70,000 Hungarians remained in the Slovak state that existed between 1939 and 1945, their rights in the nationalist, one-party, dictatorial system were minimal. Their sole parliamentary representative was count János Esterházy, who in 1942 was the only person to vote against the law implementing the deportation of Jews. (Despite his anti-fascist activity, the Czechoslovak popular courts sentenced him to death in 1945, which was later reduced to life imprisonment. János Esterházy died in prison in 1957.)

This is another section noteworthy for its silence concerning the absence of minority rights enjoyed by the Slovaks in newly Hungarian lands. It also suggests implausibly that the Hungarians were the only group unrepresented in Slovakia's one-party state. The reference to Esterházy appears to be included gratuitously to give the impression that Hungarians were uniquely anti-fascist and untainted by anti-Semitism. Hungarians in Hungary had at best a mixed record on this score: the 'first', 'second' and 'third' Jewish laws and the 1942 legislation depriving Jews of agricultural property were all passed prior to the German invasion in 1944, the Budapest synagogue had been bombed (in February 1939),²¹ Jews had been expelled from Ruthenia to the General Government of former Poland

¹⁹ Around 15 March 1939, see: László Kontler, *A History of Hungary* (Basingstoke, 2002), p. 374.

²⁰ On 27 March, see: Stanislav J. Kirschbaum, *A History of Slovakia: the Struggle for Survival* (Basingstoke, 1995), pp. 190–191.

²¹ Kálmán Benda (ed.), *Magyarország Történeti Kronológiája 1848–1944* (Budapest, 1983), pp. 955, 965, 967, 982, 988.

(1941),²² and there had been mass killings of Jews in the newly acquired areas of Yugoslavia (1942) which prompted critical comment by Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky in the Hungarian parliament.²³

Detailed commentary on the text concerning the post-war population exchange is beyond the scope of this brief paper, but, again, the silences should be noted. There is no mention of the expulsion of the 2.4 million Germans from Czechoslovakia, nor of the death of 19,000 of them, nor of the expulsion of Germans from Hungary which also took place at this time, nor of the far more numerous ethnic cleansing that took place in Poland and Germany, nor of the fact that Germans as well as Hungarians were obliged to perform forced labour. Slovak Hungarians were victims of post-war ethnic cleansing, but they were by no means the only people who suffered in this way. The Beneš decrees have been widely and rightly condemned. But in 1945 memories of 1938 and the *de facto* disloyalty of Germans and Hungarians to the Czechoslovak state (they acquiesced at the very least in its dismemberment) were still fresh, and ethnic tolerance had withered as a result of the war.²⁴ In this context, breaches of good minority relations policy were hardly surprising, even if it did prompt much soul-searching on the part of some.²⁵

III. Hungarians and Slovaks through Slovak Eyes

The text of the Slovak plaque which is used to illustrate the Slovak national myth of victimhood is as follows:

In commemoration of the 1462 children from Nyitra and Trenčín counties and further tens of thousands of Slovak children deported to the Hungarian territory and purposefully denationalized in the second

²² R.J. Crampton, *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1994), p. 189; Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of Central Europe Between the World Wars* (Bloomington, 1983), p. 126.

²³ For the events see: Crampton, *op. cit.*; Mendelsohn, *op. cit.* For the parliamentary response, see: Benda (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 986.

²⁴ Erazim Kohák, 'Making and Writing History: Edvard Beneš, 1943–48' in Norman Stone and Eduard Strouhal (eds.), *Czechoslovakia: Crossroads and Crises, 1918–88* (Basingstoke, 1989), pp. 191–192.

²⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 192–193.

half of the 19th and at the beginning of the twentieth century. (Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic, 1 June 1998.)

The plaque is not precise about what events this refers to, and this is part of its strength as a myth of victimhood. Nevertheless it appears to be a reference to the Kindergarten Act of 1891 introduced by Count Csáky, which figures in R.W. Seton-Watson's famous assault on the nationalities policies of the Hungarian half of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, *Racial Problems in Hungary*,²⁶ and is mentioned as provoking demonstrations by ethnic minorities in the multi-volumed history of Hungary produced by the Institute of History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.²⁷ Seton-Watson, who wrote his book using the pseudonym 'Scotus Viator' and who is referred to obscurely by Romsics as an 'anglicised Scot'²⁸ (the term makes no sense to either English or Scots), is seen by many, certainly by many Hungarians, to be irredeemably pro-Slovak in his writings and politics, and is certainly well versed in the grievances of the Slovak minority. In the absence of any other English-language account of these events, this paper will analyse his scholarly, yet still one-sided account.

The ostensible aims of the law were, as Viator tells us:

- (a) to place under proper supervision young children whose parents were not in a position to give them personal attention, and (b) to promote their physical development and inculcate habits of cleanliness and intelligence. (p. 221)

He rejects this and asserts that the aim was 'the Magyarization of the coming generation of non-Magyars' (p. 222), an attempt to win the children 'for Magyar culture at that tender age when the mind of the child is as underdeveloped and as sensitive as a photographic plate' (p. 221).

Whatever the situation regarding intentions, it is important to note that the 'deportations' were part of a social policy directed at 'problem families'. The plaque suggests in its vagueness the random selection of children who were then frog-marched to Hungary. In fact, only disadvantaged children were selected. Both the plaque and Viator insist

²⁶ Scotus Viator (R.W. Seton-Watson), *Racial Problems in Hungary* (London, 1908).

²⁷ Péter Hanák (ed.), *Magyarország Története 1890–1918* (Budapest, 1988), p. 1236.

²⁸ Romsics, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

that magyarization was the main goal. The plaque emotively talks of deportation to Hungarian territory, while Viator refers to the ‘compulsory erection of Infant Homes (Kindergärten and Asiles) throughout the country’ (p. 221).

But an alternative reading is possible, which Viator’s evidence does not contradict. Given the overall size of pre-Trianon Hungary, it is not surprising that the majority of the kindergartens would be located in ‘Hungarian territory’, and given the context of magyarization, it is not surprising that the language of instruction in the institutions would be Hungarian. The gap between the ostensible and real intentions of the act would thus be narrower than Viator thinks. The aim of the Act might simply have been ‘to promote their physical development and inculcate habits of cleanliness and intelligence’. It was just that, for policy-makers in Dual Monarchy Hungary, Hungarian and ‘renegade’ magyarphone (to use Viator’s emotive terminology) alike, it was self-evident that ‘habits of cleanliness and intelligence’ included speaking Hungarian, the language of the state and which the law made compulsory.²⁹ By this reading, one of the consequences of the Act was that Slovaks were ‘denationalized’ (to use the wording of the plaque) or ‘taught to become renegades to the traditions of their ancestors’ (to use that of Viator, p. 222), but the intentions of the law-makers were to address a social problem. That there was a policy of magyarization is not in doubt, nor that a central aspect of this was to enforce instruction in Hungarian rather than minority languages. But this reading suggests that the ‘deportation’ of young people to Hungary was more a consequence of the overall policy context rather than an insidious additional measure to grind down the Slovak.

Viator maintains:

That it was not designed to counteract the terribly high rate of infant mortality is clearly proved by the fact that it only applies to children between the ages of three and six.

And in footnote 376 continues:

The fact, however, that in 1906 37 per cent of all deaths occurred under the age of two, proves that crèches are far more urgently needed than

²⁹ Hanák (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 1236.

infant homes in the interests of the nation as a whole. (p. 221)

But there may have been other reasons preventing the promotion of crèches—it would perhaps have promoted the even worse image of baby-snatching.

Viator is stronger on effects than intentions. It is not clear that the government publication cited to substantiate Hungarian intentions, dated 1900, relates specifically to the Kindergarten Act policies. It seems rather to be a general statement about kindergartens and their role in promoting the Hungarian language (p. 222). In footnote 380 (p. 222), Viator further states:

If anything were needed to prove the Magyarizing tendencies of the Act, it is supplied by the fact that in 1905-6 the Magyar language was exclusively employed in 75.7 per cent of these institutions (only 2.4 per cent non-Magyar), and that while the Magyar infant homes received 58,478 crowns, the non-Magyar infant homes did not receive one farthing as subvention.

But this does not say anything about the intentions behind the Act. That these disparities were present is hardly surprising given the overall context of magyarization.

In the interests of historical accuracy, the Slovak plaque might also have added that the policy was, in fact, rather unsuccessful. Towards the end of his account, Viator writes:

But after our experience of previous educational laws, it will no longer cause surprise to find that the Kindergarten Act of 1891 has also been very partially carried out. After a lapse of seventeen years, only 21 per cent of the children who are liable to attend actually made their appearance; and as a quarter of these institutions are open only during the summer, 21 per cent is really a somewhat arbitrary and misleading figure. Twelve per cent of the attendants are unqualified; and even if we include these unqualified persons, we find that there is still only an average of one attendant to every ninety children. (pp. 222–223)

That the plaque makes no such reference is unsurprising. The incompetence of the oppressor is not part of a myth of victimhood.

To continue with this sort of analysis would be tedious in the extreme. The point is very clear. In the public spheres of the nations of Eastern Europe, history is rewritten as myths of national victimhood, as one-sided, selective, and decontextualised accounts. The fact of such readings of history is less important than the consequence of the use to which they are put. It would be easier after all just to forget about them than painstakingly to set the historical record straight. But by rehearsing the national myths, by presenting ‘us’ as victims and ‘them’ as mindless aggressors, the ‘them’ are dehumanised. They are ogres, not to be trusted, incapable of rational dialogue. Negotiations with ‘them’ will be fruitless. If ‘we’ want something done, we must do it ourselves.

Conclusion

The question this paper set itself was: where could such notions as the contents of Article 18 come from? How could Hungarian politicians genuinely believe that they were doing something unproblematic when they passed the bill? The obverse of the question was: where did all the controversy come from on the other sides, given that in reality there were precedents for most of its provisions? The answer to both questions, the paper has argued, is the persistence of nationalist myths of national victimhood which dehumanise the ethnic other and make negotiation and reasoned discussion impossible. Victims do not see any need to consult with their oppressors. Victims seek redress on their own terms. Only politicians who viewed events through the prism of a myth of national victimhood could innocently and unreflectingly have proposed measures such as Article 18 of the Status Law, which would result in extreme intervention into the domestic policies of neighbouring states. Only politicians informed by similar myths from the other side could have reacted so hysterically to the proposals. While myths of national victimhood persist and the nations of Eastern Europe see themselves as victims and their neighbours as oppressors, incidents such as the status law and the scandal it provoked will be repeated. The European Union was based around the historic burial of French and German national myths of victim and oppressor. It has welcomed into its fold nations which betray no willingness to bury theirs.