Is Trianon Still Alive?
Border Issues between Slovakia and Hungary after WWI

Hiroshi FUKUDA (Kyoto University)
hfukuda@cias.kyoto-u.ac.jp

Introduction

One could argue that the national self-determination principle was an unintended byproduct of World War I. The Allies did not want to dissolve the Habsburg Monarchy or to universalize the principle of self-determination in the world. However, the war situation changed the Allies’ mind in 1918. “Small” nations between Germany and Russia therefore succeeded in attaining independence, even when the majority of the nations did not intend to break away from the Habsburg Empire until the last phase of the war and they were ill-prepared for their own independence.

In this paper, I would like to focus on the border demarcation process between the Slovak part of the newly established Czechoslovakia (hereafter Slovakia) and Hungary just after WWI, and its reflection in the present day. The Trianon Treaty of 1920, by which the border between the two countries was finally fixed, was one of the most crucial topics in both Slovak and Hungarian historiography. For Slovaks, it was the beginning of Czechoslovakia and the new starting point of their national history. By contrast, it was a national “tragedy” for Hungarians (Magyars), since they had lost two-thirds of their own “historical” territory and two-fifths of their population because of the treaty. It seems to us that Hungarians are still suffering from Trianon “trauma.”

For example, I found it surprising that Roman Holec, a Slovak historian, had strongly criticized the Hungarian historiography about the Trianon Treaty in 2011.1 Though I knew of the seriousness of the history issue between the two countries, it was unexpected that even Holec, a moderate historian, became somewhat emotional when it came to Hungary. And a book entitled Insight into Slovak-Magyar Relations was published in 2009 with the support of the Slovak Academy of Sciences and the government itself. The aim of the book was to give a Slovak and an “objective” view to the Hungarian community. According to the editor of this book, a large part of the Hungarian views are “absurdly anachronistic in present-day Europe,” and are “a constant source of tension in Slovak-Magyar relations.”

I am not in a position to make a judgment on whose view is correct. In this paper, I

would like to review the “point zero”\(^3\) in both Slovak and Hungarian history, that is, the demarcation process just after WWI, mainly from contemporary Slovak historiography.

1. Improvisational Demarcation Process during 1918-1920

The idea of an independent Czechoslovak state itself was relatively new and not shared among the majority of Czech and Slovak leaders until the last phase of the war. T. G. Masaryk, the first president of Czechoslovakia, was at the forefront of the idea; however, even his plan did not take concrete shape until at least 1915 (see Figure 1).\(^4\) It is worth mentioning that a corridor between “Bohemia and Slovakia” and the territories of the “Lusatian-Czech” population were included in Masaryk’s sketch. Though he emigrated to the Allied countries and began an independence campaign after the outbreak of war, needless to say, nobody could predict the victory of the Allies and the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy at the early stage of war. In a sense, it was Masaryk’s strategy to insist on the maximum, that is, independence, in order to extract as many concessions as possible from the monarchy after the war.

The second figure is a propagational map (Figure 2) presented by a Czechoslovak exile group in Paris in 1917. According to this map, the borders of Czech lands and the northern border of Slovakia were clearly delineated; however, the southern and eastern borders of Slovakia were still an open question. Slovakia was historically the northern part of Hungary and did not form an administrative unit in itself. Therefore, the Czech-Slovak delegation decided to emphasize the “natural rights” of the Slovak people to a demarcation line between Slovakia and Hungary, while they insisted on the historical continuity of the Czech borders at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919.

But who was living on the borderland between Slovakia and Hungary? The “natural rights” of whom? According to a census of 1910, which constituted the last statistics of the Hungarian part in the Habsburg Monarchy, Hungarian-speaking people comprised the majority on the periphery of the Danube. On the other hand, Slovaks insisted that the census was taken under severe pressure of assimilation and did not reflect the exact situation. In their view, quite a lot of Hungarian-speaking people must have been the product of coercive magyarization and were counted as Slovaks. The validity of this census is still controversial in the twenty-first century.\(^5\) In addition to this, Czech and Slovak leaders regarded the Danube as indispensable

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\(^5\) Ladislav Deák, “On the Reliability of the Hungarian Nationality Statistics from 1910,” *Insight into*
for both geographic and strategic reasons. As observed above, there were no *a priori* fixed borders between the two countries. Having territorial talks in Paris, the Czech-Slovak delegation prepared multiple plans for negotiation.6

Another problem was that Slovakia was *de facto* under the rule of Hungary even after the war. In such a confused situation, Milan Hodža, a leader of the Agrarian Party, was sent to Budapest as an emissary, the “plenipotentiary minister and ambassador,” from the newly formed Czechoslovak government, in order to secure the withdrawal of the Hungarian army. However, Hodža and other leaders like Edvard Beneš, who attended the Paris Peace Conference as representatives of the new Czechoslovakia, were at cross purposes.7 Beneš thought that demarcation should be discussed at the Peace Conference and not through bilateral negotiations. Despite this, Hodža negotiated single-handedly with Hungary and came to a temporary arrangement. Hodža did not know Beneš’s intentions, while Beneš failed to acknowledge Hodža’s efforts in Budapest.

However, Hodža understood well that his talks with Hungary did not have an official character. His own mission was only to gain time. He arrived at Budapest on 24th November 1918 and signed an agreement on a temporary demarcation line (the so-called Hodža-Bartha line; see Figure 3) on 6th December, which made the retreat of the Hungarian army possible. It was of decisive importance for the Czech-Slovak side, since they had to await the arrival of their own army units from Italy until the end of the year. However, the Hodža-Bartha line, which was demarcated along “ethnographic” borders, was severely condemned and regarded as his political loss by his rivals.8

The next question was the capital city of Slovakia, Bratislava itself. This historically trilingual city had multiple names, that is, Pozsony (Hungarian), Pressburg (German), and Prešporok (Slovak; please note that it was not “Bratislava”). Bratislava was not an equivocal center for the Slovak national movement, but rather a German or Hungarian city.9 Located on the borderland on the Danube and burdened with geopolitical importance, Bratislava had the possibility of becoming a “neutralized” city named Wilson’s City. Also, the Hodža-Bartha line

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*Slovak-Magyar Relations*, pp. 7-17.
did not regard it as a Slovak area. The Slovak National Council, representative of the Slovak nation, was located in Martin, while the Ministry with Full Power to Administer Slovakia with the support of Prague was established in Žilina on 12th December 1918. The Czechoslovak government in Prague thought that a local administrative center was urgently needed, but that Žilina was not enough. The Ministry with Full Power headed by Vavro Šrobár then decided to move to Bratislava, which was the second-largest city in “historical” Hungary, on 4th February 1919.10 One could argue that Czechoslovakia succeeded in creating a fait accompli before the Paris Peace Conference by establishing the Slovak capital in Bratislava.

On the other hand, the Eastern Slovak National Council, a counter-organization to the Slovak National Council, was founded in Prešov. Its leader, Viktor Dvortsák (Dvorčák, Dvorcsák), edited a Šariš dialect periodical and proclaimed the Slovjak nation.11 Also, a group of Germans in the Spiš region declared the Spiš Republic on 9th December 1918, where all nationalities should be guaranteed equality under the slogan: “Switzerland under the Tatra Mountains.”12 Since these movements were skeptical or adversarial concerning the Czechoslovak government, the Hungarian Károlyi government supported such small movements with the aim of keeping the “historical” Hungary. However, the Czechoslovak army began to occupy Slovakia in stages at the end of 1918, and such “minority” activities then disappeared.

2. Trianon in the Twenty-first Century

Frozen discussions about Trianon under the socialist regime began to attract lots of attention again after 1989. József Antall, the first democratically elected prime minister of Hungary after the fall of the old regime, proclaimed that he would have liked to be the premier of fifteen million Hungarians in May 1990.13 This statement was quite surprising especially for neighboring countries, since the population of Hungary itself was only about ten million and there were about five million ethnic Hungarians living in the neighboring countries. His words clearly connoted the memory of Trianon. Though the official foreign policy of Hungary had never escalated to a revision of the Trianon Treaty itself or a revival of the “Great” Hungary, Hungarian politicians consistently showed increasing interest in “kin” Hungarians

living abroad. Even in 2006, Géza Jeszenszky, a former foreign minister of Hungary (1990-94), stated that autonomy for kin minorities outside Hungary “would lay the Trianon Peace to rest.”

A kind of culmination of such Hungarian efforts was the Act on Hungarians Living in Neighboring Countries (hereafter the Status Law), which was passed by parliament on 19th June 2001. According to the preamble of the Status Law, its aim is to provide “benefits and assistance” to “persons of Hungarian nationality living outside the Hungarian borders” (Figure 4). The law itself did not intend to undermine the sovereignty of surrounding countries. However, because of provocative words and actions by the then governing party Fidesz, a powerful nationalistic party in Hungary, the law caused a diplomatic dispute not only among the countries concerned, but also at the EU level. Also in Slovakia, one of the neighboring countries, then Slovak prime minister Mikuláš Dzurinda took an unyielding stance against Hungary and the Status Law, which made constructive dialogue impossible. In a sense, both Slovakia and Hungary are still suffering from the Trianon trauma.

Another source of the problem was the presence of the SNS (Slovak National Party), an ultra-nationalist party, in the ruling coalition in Slovakia during 2006-10. For example, Ján Slota, the leader of the SNS, stated in an interview to a Czech newspaper in 2006 that he envied Czech people who had driven out Germans after WWII. According to him, Slovaks should have done the same thing against Hungarians at that time. However, it is necessary to mention that a joint project named “Common Past, Common Future” started in 2007 by the two governments. In this project, the two governments also supported the Joint Commission of Slovak and Hungarian Historians in creating a common history schoolbook, though such efforts have not led directly to success until now due to such different perceptions of history.

Milan S. Ďurica, one of the most famous nationalistic historians in Slovakia, plainly indicated his historical perception in the preface of his book:

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The Slovak nation . . . had already realized her own statehood, before all of her other Slavic neighbors or Finno-Ugric robber-tribes, from which the Hungarian nation emerged at the beginning of second millennium AD. The Slovak nation had lost her own statehood through the centuries because of such Asiatic [Hungarian] aggressors’ attacks and Germanic Drang nach Osten. However, the Slovak nation had already become such a developed ethnic community by the end of the ninth century that foreign dominance by blood-related Slavic Poles, Czechs, and even quite alien Hungarians could not lead to assimilation all Slovaks or deletion of their own national identity from the record of history.19

 Needless to say, such an offensive explanation of national history inevitably collides with other national histories. As concerns Hungarian history, it is important to emphasize St. Stephen (István) I, the first King of Hungary, and his control over the Carpathian Basin. The more Hungarian nationalists insist on her “historical” territory and homogeneity, the less room for other nationalities like Slovaks will be left. In an interview with Mr. Ďurica, he answered me as follows:

If each nation acquires her own history, conflicts among nations will be resolved. If each nation can keep her own identity, it is guaranteed that her own history will be learnt, that one can be proud of it, and that disputes or conflicts will not be escalate, though their histories might cause some tensions. However, if each national history is denied, or each nation loses her confidence, that nation will be nervous and tend to stir up fights over little things. Look at the Yugoslav Wars. Even Yugoslavism could not melt each nation’s identity. To the contrary, it caused bloody battles. Both we and you are justly proud of our and your history. That’s important.20

It was quite astonishing to me that Japanese nationalists also apply the same logic as Slovak nationalists to justify their own historical views. In Eastern Asia, there is also severe historical dispute especially over WWII between Japan and her neighboring countries. According to Japanese nationalists, the Japanese should not incline to a “masochistic view” of

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20 An interview with Mr. Milan S. Ďurica (19th July 2007, Bratislava).
history. Every nation including Japan must be proud of her own glorious past, which would lead us to a true, peaceful coexistence in Eastern Asia.

Preliminary Conclusion

National history is a source of never-ending disputes. It is said that the relationship between Slovakia and Hungary is one of the worst bilateral ties in the EU, and dispute over history is at the root of the problem. Marián Hronský, a leading historian of the Treaty of Trianon, wrote in his last book that the Trianon Treaty is still a Gordian Knot for the Slovak-Hungarian relationship. In this regard, the Trianon Treaty is still alive and historians have to tackle many politicized arguments as well as the wave of irredentism or revisionism from the Hungarian side.

It seems impossible to resolve such historical disputes; however, it is necessary to ease tensions between the two sides. Creating a common history schoolbook is one kind of good strategy. According to Dušan Kováč, one the most recognized historians and consistently engaged in the project, the perception gap itself is not the problem. It is important to disclose the different interpretations and explanations of the two countries’ historians, as in the case of the project between Germany and France, or between Germany and Poland.

22 J. Hamberger, Content and Quality of the Slovak-Hungarian Relations, p. 33.
Figure 1: Masaryk’s sketch of the future Czechoslovak State 1915 in Perman, The Shaping of the Czechoslovak State, at the end of the book; Hronský, Trianon, p. 97.
Figure 2: A propagational map presented by a Czechoslovak exile group in Paris in 1917 in Hronský, Trianon, p. 97.

Figure 3: The Hodža-Bartha line in Vavro Šrobár, Osvobodené Slovensko: pamäti z rokov 1918-1920 (Praha, 1928), at the end of the book.
Figure 4: Hungarians in Central and East Europe, and the number of Hungarians in Slovakia in Fact Sheets on Hungary 1/2002, pp. 3, 5.