

### **1920 in the Memory of Central Europeans: A Regional Panorama**

Veronika Szeghy-Gayer, Csaba Zahorán, Miklós Mitrovits, György Lukács B.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51918/ceh.2021.1.1>

Institute of Central European Studies, University of Public Service

#### **Abstract**

The year 1920 plays key a role in memory politics in East-Central European countries, too. Reconstruction had already been under way at some places and in newly annexed areas new authorities began to establish themselves. Elsewhere, for instance in Polish, Ukrainian and Belarussian areas, military operations had yet to end. Moreover, the border between Poland and Lithuania, as well as Poland and Germany (in Eastern Prussia) were uncertain, while Silesia (Śląsk in Polish and Schlesien in German) was in upheaval and the future of Fiume had yet not to be settled. Thus, it is not surprising that the events that took place a hundred years ago are among the most salient questions for historical research and memory politics. In this paper, we survey these in the form of brief, country-specific summaries.

#### **Keywords**

memory politics, Central Europe, year 1920, Word War I

## “Czechoslovakians” and the Memory of “Year 0”

28 October, the day of the declaration of the Czechoslovak Republic in Prague was a national holiday of Slovaks during the interwar period. Following the fall of state socialism and the disintegration of Czechoslovakia in 1993, for nearly three decades, it was only the Czechs who officially celebrated it. We shall mention that, starting from the 1990s, there were members of the Slovakian political elite who kept proposing that it should also become a national holiday in Slovakia. Although the place of Slovakia within Czechoslovakia is often the matter of debate, the most relevant arguments for seeing 28 October as a turning point in Slovak national history are the following: Slovaks became a constitutive nation of a state in October 1918. This was the first time that its boundaries had been marked. Moreover, the Czechoslovak state was the one that made it possible to lay the foundations of the economic, social and cultural modernity of today's Slovakia. November 2020 brought about a major change in this debate: the Slovak Parliament voted in favour of adding 28 October to the list of national days even though it did not become a holiday.



Banner of the Republic of Czechoslovakia with the script "truth shall be victorious"

It is widely known that 1918 was a turning point in the history of the Czech nation as it was no less than the renewal of Czech statehood. Czechoslovakia was one of the most democratic political systems of the Central European region at the time. This also means that for the Czech society and political elite the jubilee in 2018 had major importance, while the 100th anniversary of the Trianon Treaty caused less excitement among academics and in public life. In Slovakia, the situation was quite different.

There, the frame within which Slovaks interpreted the Trianon question shifted as a result of a large event on 2 June 2020 when Prime Minister Igor Matovič received a hundred ethnically Hungarian public figures of Slovakia at the castle of Bratislava. It was for the first time that a Prime Minister of Slovakia declared that historic Hungary was part of the common past and that he understood why Trianon hurt Hungarians. This indicated that Slovak politicians were willing to make the link between Trianon and the long-term survival of the Hungarian minority. It had not been the case earlier. If the question occurred in public politics at all, Trianon meant the departure of Slovaks from Hungary, thus it was framed as a success story, just the opposite of the trauma that Hungarians associated with it.



Slovak historian Roman Holec and Hungarian historian László Szarka in the programme called Do kríža. Source: [facebook.com/dokriza](https://facebook.com/dokriza)

Various Slovak media channels asked several intellectuals and public figures about the topic. TV channels broadcasted interviews and talks on Trianon and about the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. Slovak authors published new books among which we shall primarily mention Roman Holec's book *Trianon, diadal és katasztrófa [Trianon, victory and catastrophe]* written in a reader friendly style and Ondrej Ficeri's *A Trianon utáni Kassa [Kosice after Trianon]*. This interest reached so far that an academic research group started working on the Trianon Treaty under the leadership of a professor of legal history Erik Štenpien at the Department of Law of the Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice.

Outstanding experts, such as László Szarka, László Vörös and Štefan Šutaj, whose work cannot be labelled ethno-centric or nationalist, had the opportunity to talk of Trianon in prime time on television. On 3 June, the Slovak state television broadcast the discussion programme called *Do križa*, then hosted by Štefan Chrappa and Jaroslav Daniška, in which László Szarka and Roman Holec debated about currently relevant aspects of the Trianon phenomenon. Importantly, Roman Holec mentioned that he believed the Trianon treaty was unjust.

Of course, in 2020 there were also some who remembered Trianon as a positive thing for Slovaks. For example, despite the erstwhile cultural association, Matica Slovenská announced that the anniversary could be an occasion for learning about each other, several of their local branches organized festive events on 4 June. Moreover, one could also encounter explicitly anti-Hungarian interpretations and publications, such as Edita Tarabčáková's work bearing the curious title *Sérelem érte a magyarokat? A valódi igazság Trianonról [Were there real injustice against Hungarians? The truth about Trianon]*, for example. Overall, the events reflected that Trianon has not become an issue of primary importance for the majority society of Slovakia, yet it is also clear that there is a growing number of Slovaks who understand the sensitivity of Hungarians (both of those who live in Slovakia and of Hungarians in Hungary).

*Veronika Szeghy-Gayer*

## Romania – Yet Another Centenary

2020 featured a new experience for the Romanian historical consciousness that explicitly related to Hungarians. The centenary celebrations of the Great Union in 2018 blended into the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Trianon Peace Treaty.

The symbolic year of Greater Romania was 1918. That was the year when Romania was granted Bessarabia, Bukovina and Transylvania and it actually took hold of these territories in the following year. By 1920, only the international sanctioning of state succession had been pending, and the integration of these newly acquired regions had already been under way. It was a sign of the pace of the integration process that temporary governing bodies, including the Consiliul Dirigent of Transylvania formed in December 1918, were dissolved on 4 April 1920. However, the signing of the Treaty was clearly the culmination of this. Yet, for a long time, the anniversary of “Trianon” had only an indirect presence in the Romanian historical consciousness. In the traditional narrative on territorial expansion, independent achievements of the Romanians occupied the central stage. In this interpretation, Greater Romania was the outcome of the Romanian efforts, chiefly the participation of the army and the self-governance of the Romanian communities in Transylvania, as well as Bukovina and Bessarabia. International constellations and support further facilitated this process. The Treaty of Trianon and the other Paris Peace Treaties after World War I sanctioned these outcomes and achievements, thus, memory politics had hardly paid any attention to these documents and negotiations. At the same time, the anniversary of the assembly at Alba Iulia gained so much importance that it became the national holiday of Romania in 1990.

Thus, Romanian memory politics chiefly focused on the Great Union Day. The homogenizing historical discourse of the Romanian nationalism of the post-World War II period reaffirmed this orientation. However, the year 2020 brought about some changes in this regard. Additional elements were added to the themes of the 2018 centenary celebrations – namely, the Great Union Day, the assessment of the past century of Romania, and the possibility that the Republic of Moldova might (re)join Romania. In 2020 a shift occurred in this regard: the Romanian public paid more attention to Hungary, consequently, Trianon became part of the Romanian memory politics.



Souvenir with portraits of the Romanian signatories of the Peace Treaty

It seems that although the events of the centenary in Hungary played some role in this shift, the decisive factor was the domestic politics in Romania. The journals and published conference papers hardly ever influenced the wider public and the legislative bodies. However, this issue has been on the agenda of the Romanian politics for quite some time: Titus Corlățean, currently a senator representing the Social Democrats as well as a former minister for foreign affairs, and some other members of the Senate submitted a legislative proposal in 2015 that would have designated the anniversary of Trianon as the day of remembrance. However, the proposal was withdrawn in the same year. Subsequently, an independent (formerly social democrat) representative, Bogdan Diaconu, also tried pushing through a proposal titled as “The day of Trianon and the struggle against the Hungarian oppression”, which was rejected by the parliament. However, by the autumn of 2019, developments – that included changes in the position of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians and the mobilization of the Romanian nationalist voters – led to a situation where it seemed feasible for Corlățean to submit his proposal again. In the spring of 2020, President Klaus Iohannis also brought the issue to the agenda in an anti-Social Democrat and anti-Hungarian exclamation that received wider publicity.

The so-called “Trianon-Law” passed as a result of this patriotic bidding. Subsequent efforts of the president to prevent it caused only little delay and the law eventually came into force. The two chambers of the Romanian Parliament voted on it in the autumn of 2020, which meant the only spectacular





The celebration held by the Calea Neamului Association at Sfântu Gheorghe (Sepsiszentgyörgy) on 4 June 2020 (Photo: Csaba János Pozsony)

event that took place on the 100th anniversary. A chauvinist organization *Asociația Calea Neamului* had also organized the occupation of the cemetery in Úzvölgy and celebrated the signing of the Treaty in Sepsiszentgyörgy, one of the centres of Szeklerland region mostly inhabited by Hungarians. Notably, they refrained from showing or chanting anti-Hungarian slogans. The Hungarian government did not provoke Romanian chauvinists even though the Romanian minister for foreign affairs expressed that he was not happy for the Hungarian parliament to have nominated 2020 as the year of national togetherness. Budapest and the organizations of minority Hungarians in Transylvania commemorated the event, which had tragic consequences for Hungary and the Hungarian nation-building in a moderate way.

Romanian historians and the Romanian Academy of Sciences facilitated the institutionalization of the Trianon issue. In fact, a large proportion of Romanian historians and the Academy of Sciences are committed to Romanian nation-building. This was apparent on a number of occasions around the centenary of the birth of Greater Romania when the Academy opposed the idea that ethnic minorities should have autonomy and objected all interpretations that criticized the Romanian national narrative on the Great Union Day.

To illustrate this role, we shall briefly look at the related activities of Io-

an-Aurel Pop, a renowned Transylvanian historian of the early period. As the rector of the Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca/Kolozsvár, and as the president of the Romanian Academy of Sciences (since spring 2018) he spoke about the Romanian centenary, 1 December and Trianon on several occasions. He also published a number of opinion papers. In one of his talks given in 2017 he stated that the Trianon 100 Research Group of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences had been an anti-Romanian propaganda office. This statement was much talked about in Romanian media.



The cover of the special issue of the journal Historia

Apart from academic texts, TV programmes and popular literature, a number of public monuments recall the birth of Greater Romania. In recent years, these have been installed or reinstalled to commemorate those personalities who played a key role in the events between 1918 and 1920. The list includes the bust and equestrian statue of King Ferdinand, "the Unifier" inaugurated



in Carei (Nagykároly, 2015) and Oradea (Nagyvárad, 2019), respectively; the head of the wartime French military mission to Romania, General Henri Mathias Berthelot erected in Bucharest in 2018, and the busts of the “two friends of Romanians” Woodrow Wilson the President of the USA, and Emmanuel de Martonne the French geographer who supported the arguments that Romanians brought up in Alba Iulia (2018); another monument for de Martonne in Oradea (2019) and the statue of General Gheorghe Mărdărescu who commanded the Romanian army that occupied Budapest in 1919 - erected in Cluj-Napoca (Kolozsvár) in 2019. In the autumn of 2020, a series of postal stamps commemorated the treaties of Paris, including the Trianon Treaty. The Romanian National Bank also issued several memorial coins on the occasion of the centenary of the Great War and the Great Union Day. Notably, the Trianon Treaty is not among the events specifically recalled.

The nationalist interpretation of Trianon was the logical consequence of the triumphalist approach of the national discourse about the Great Union. The outcome of the memory politics and events of the year was the link between Alba Iulia (Gyulafehérvár) and Trianon, which had been understated until present day, became fixed in public perception in Romania, too. Advocates of Romanian nation-building probably hoped by making 4 June a celebrated anniversary they will have one more occasion to stress the importance of the post-World War I status quo apart from the national holiday celebrated on 1 December each year. This is a message that addresses all citizens of Romania (both the majority and minority groups) as well as Hungarians living in Hungary or elsewhere.

*Csaba Zahorán*

## **The Year of the Miracle Along the River Vistula**

At the end of World War I, on 11 November 1911, an independent and sovereign Polish state was created again, for the first time in 123 years. Thus, in the interwar period and after the systemic change of 1989, the most important national holiday in Poland was 11 November. The other national holiday of similar importance falls on 15 August. The latter day has multiple meanings: on the one hand, Roman Catholics celebrate the day as the Assumption of Mary, thus it was generally considered as anti-regime manifestation. On

these days, tens of thousands of people gathered at the square in front of the monastery of the Order of Saint Paul at Częstochowa or at the Benedictine Monastery of Kalwaria Zebrzydowska near Krakow. After the systemic change, 15 August became an official holiday to celebrate. Since 1992 this has also been the day of the Polish Army since the Polish army defeated the Red Army near Warsaw this day in 1920. Considering the circumstances of the battle, no surprise that the religious event and the battle of historic importance have been intertwined. The stake at the battle of Warsaw was no less than the survival of the hardly two-year-old state and the Red Army outnumbered the Poles, thus victory was a miracle. In Polish memory politics the battle appears as the “Miracle at the Vistula” that saved Poland and Europe from the Bolshevik army. This is the event that Poland commemorated on 15 August 2020.



**Take up arms! Join the voluntary army!**

**Propaganda poster from the period of the Polish-Bolshevik War of 1920**

The Polish nation celebrated the end of World War I as a victory. Thus, preserving the status quo was a top priority for the political elite. Moreover, after having defeated and pushed back the Bolsheviks as well as acquiring

territories in the West (Greater Poland) and in the South (Silesia [in Polish: Śląsk] and the Zips [in Polish: Spisz]), this elite had regional ambitions. During 1920, Marshall Józef Piłsudski the “father of independence” defined his policy to preserve the sovereignty, as well as independence and integrity. The central element was the way to ensure that the two neighbouring powers, Germany and Russia, would never be able to divide Poland among themselves. Piłsudski’s response was a plan for a Central European federation that, in his concept, would be the cooperation of nations that had lived in the former territory of the Jagellonian Empire and the Polish-Lithuanian Republic against Bolshevik Russia.

The Polish statesman believed that the interests of Poles, Ukrainians, Belarussians and Lithuanians were common. The federative structure that they imagined would have included Poles, Lithuanians and Belarussians (i.e. the former Lithuanian Grand Duchy) in the same state and a federation with an independent Ukraine, which was in the making. According to Piłsudski, this could have been realized exactly in the year 1920. However ambitious his plans were, he missed taking the Lithuanian national awakening and its anti-Polish content into consideration, and he also disregarded the fragility of the Ukrainian national consciousness as well as that Ukrainians did not perceive the Bolshevik threat as a fatal danger. At the same time, we shall recognize that if Piłsudski’s plan had been realized, there would have been a buffer zone set between Poland and the Soviet Union which came into existence soon thereafter. Eventually, the Peace Treaty signed in Riga on 18 March 1921 created another framework. The buffer zone was divided between Poland and the Soviet Union and the Lithuanians, Belarussians and Ukrainians who landed on the Polish side, thus failed to receive autonomy. Therefore, when Piłsudski apologized for the Treaty to the Ukrainian units that fought along with him, it was not a gesture out of proportions.

Yet, Piłsudski’s concept remained the baseline of the Polish foreign policy after 1989. The goal was to create or maintain a clear division between Russia and the nations mentioned above in political, economic and cultural terms. The Russian annexation of Crimea increased the level of Polish anxiety to a level not seen in the last 100 years. Thus, in the course of the centenary celebrations of 2020, memory politics focused on the Polish-Ukrainian alliance and the anti-Russian elements of their common history.



**The statues of Charles de Gaulle, Józef Piłsudski, Pál Teleki and Simon Petljura in Skierniewice**

The way the Hungarians' role came to the foreground was an interesting sidestory of the memory politics of this alliance. It was for Pál Teleki's first government that provided munitions' supply to the Polish army, which proved decisive during the battle of Warsaw. In the past decades, a number of Polish settlements have inaugurated memorials to recall this support. Among these, one stands in front of the railway station of Skierniewice, where the cargo of arms reached. The plaquettes in the city of Warsaw and in Ossów commemorate the event, too. In 2020, new monuments were erected. First, the statue of Pál Teleki was unveiled in Krakow, then a new plaquette was presented in the small town of Brok, finally, a group of statues, that of Charles de Gaulle, Pál Teleki, Simon Petljura and Józef Piłsudski were erected in Skierniewice. The statues represent the group of politicians who provided real aid to Poland in the fight against the Bolsheviks. This was quite a unique contextualization of the post-Trianon Hungarian politics – this is a novelty in terms of the international context and not only if we juxtapose it with how Hungarians tend to perceive this history.

The events of 1918 and 1920 are the foundations of the current Polish memory politics. They are the symbols of realizing and securing independence. Most importantly, those events are not only commemorated and celebrated, but also they serve the essence of their content resurface in the current domestic and foreign policy.

*Miklós Mitrovits*

## **Referendum in Carinthia – A Major Trauma for Slovenes?**

Slovenia commemorated 10 October 2020 as the day of the 100th anniversary of the Carinthian plebiscite. For Slovenes, the referendum was a traumatic event as a result of which some areas, with a Slovenian majority were annexed to the new Republic of Austria. Consequently, the idea of uniting all Slovenes in one state, a goal defined in 1848, was not realized after World War I. We may add that the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes could not prevent Italy from taking the Western strip of the area that Slovenes inhabited, and there were villages with Slovenian population in the territory of post-Trianon Hungary, too. However, the Slovenian public considered Carinthia as the most important loss. The memory of this event is particularly bitter because many Slovenes voted against joining the Kingdom of Serbs, the Croats and Slovenes, thus, against uniting with their fellow nationals.

After World War I, Slovenian General Rudolf Maister took Maribor and the part of Styria that lays between River Drava and Mur by force. This move played a key role in granting the Southern Slavic state sovereignty over territories of Prekmurje that used to belong to the Hungarian Kingdom. However, military intervention came too late in Carinthia. Great Powers ruled that there had to be a referendum in the greater part of the region where Slovenians were in majority. For this purpose, the area was divided into Zone A and Zone B. In the much larger Zone A, 59% of the voters preferred Austria with an exceptionally high, 95%, turnout. Since 70% of the inhabitants were Slovenes, at least one third of them must have also voted for joining Austria. Although doubts about the fairness of the referendum arose in several places, the Yugoslav government recognized that the result was too clear for repeating the vote. According to the terms agreed prior to the vote, in the northern Zone B, the referendum was not held.





The areas of Carinthia indicated with brown were annexed by Austria. The darker parts designate the areas where the majority voted for joining Yugoslavia.

In Slovenia, the centenary of the referendum was a major issue in public media and in the press in general. Experts of the events shared the results of their research in programmes and articles that attracted much attention. The representatives of the Slovenian minority in Carinthia had the opportunity to talk of the events of 1920, their current position and prospects. They highlighted the symbolic importance of the celebrations at Klagenfurt (Celovec). At that event, the Austrian president delivered his speech partly in Slovenian language. Although he mentioned that many Slovenes voted for joining Austria, he publicly apologized for the fact that Austria was late to act upon the constitutional rights theoretically granted to the Slovenian minority. This was the first instance of such a public declaration.

Due to measures that were in place in order to prevent the spread of the pandemic, most conferences that would have discussed the referendum were cancelled or postponed. However, a series of monographic studies and papers appeared shedding light on many aspects that have not been analysed earlier. Among other things, these works detail the preparations regarding Carinthia during the Paris Peace Treaty negotiations and the importance of economic and infrastructural considerations in these. We also have a clear-

er picture about the role of the Italian representatives and that there was a strong link between the case of Carinthia and South Tyrol. Recent research has foregrounded the decisive role of the Austrian representatives' convincing arguments that led to President Woodrow Wilson's support for the referendum.



Contemporary Austrian propaganda brochure

Authors who talked of the Germanization efforts also contributed to a better understanding of the circumstances of the referendum. These works highlighted the differences among Slovenian elites of the former provinces of Austria emphasizing that the Karavankas had not only been physical but also mental barriers among the Slovenes of Carinthia, Carniola and Styria. For decades, historians have been debating the weight of the application of military force in the outcome of the referendum. According to Slovenian historians, the key factors were Germanization, economic interests, and the successful Austrian propaganda – mostly carried out in Slovenian language – that intended to scare Slovenians with the prospect of being enlisted to the Yugoslav army, and entice them with stressing the importance of regional identity.

Slovenes believe that Carinthia was the birthplace of the Slovenian people. The image of early Medieval Carinthia as a mythical state of Slavs has been at the centre of historical consciousness since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As part of Tito's Yugoslavia, Slovenia annexed sizeable territories with a majority Slovenian population West of the pre-World War II borders, however, after World War II, Great Powers decided to keep the Austrian border unaltered. For Slovenians, this made the loss more painful and that is how it became the most significant historical trauma for them. Commemorative events reflected this. At the same time, we shall not forget that one tenth of historic Carinthia became part of Slovenia without any referendum.

*György Lukács B.*



Contemporary Yugoslav propaganda brochure

*Translated by Róbert Balogh*