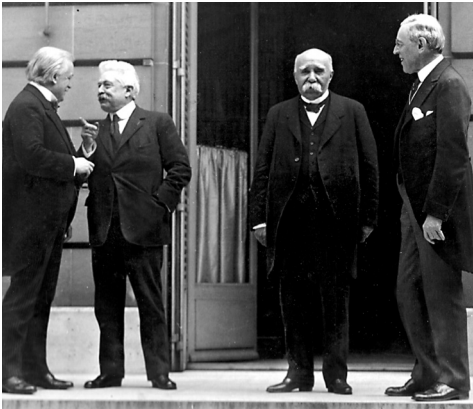


# From Political Nostalgia to Cultural Trauma? Hungary's European Dilemma a Hundred Years After Trianon

IONEL N. SAVA



Council of Four at the Paris Peace  
Conference: DAVID LLOYD GEORGE,

VITTORIO ORLANDO, GEORGES CLEMENCEAU,  
WOODROW WILSON (27 May 1919).

SOURCE: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/  
wiki/File:Big\\_four.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Big_four.jpg).

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## Introduction

**T**HE WORLD War I centennial has  
been celebrated in the whole of  
Europe in the spirit of reconcil-  
iation and integration. There was  
no victory to be remembered, but the  
memory of the fallen ones was to be  
honored and the necessary lessons had  
to be learned. Nowadays, France and  
Germany, the adversaries of 1914 and  
1940, are the vectors of reconciliation  
and integration. Their example is in-  
strumental for the construction of a  
whole and free Europe, and their part-  
nership is to be followed by all other  
countries.

In Central and Eastern Europe,  
the reconciliation occurred soon after  
the fall of the Berlin Wall. The first  
Romanian-Hungarian reconciliation  
program started in the mid-1990s.  
France and Germany offered generous  
support. Diplomatic missions to Bonn  
and Paris learned what a *mariage de  
raison*\* meant for the European unity.  
Hence, both reforms and bilateral co-

\* The author took part in these missions.

operation facilitated the former socialist countries' integration within NATO and the European Union.

However, things changed to a certain extent as early as the 2000s. Bucharest and other capitals in the region acknowledged a political change in Hungary followed by a reconciliation reversal. As a consequence, Budapest stated there was nothing to be celebrated in 2018. On the contrary, in 2020 Hungary commemorated one hundred years since the signing of the Trianon Treaty.

A certain interest for the interwar period has been rediscovered in neighboring Hungary, first as historical nostalgia and then in the more severe forms of the Trianon trauma. This study examines the social and political rationales that keep the interwar nostalgia alive and feed the current collective trauma of Trianon.

Against all odds, for the neighboring countries this is once again a good opportunity to express consideration for the dedicated Hungarian efforts to find a convenient solution to a historical problem. Romania has nothing to ask from Hungary except reconciliation and European integration. Nevertheless, Bucharest is fully aware that, in the current European context, European reconciliation takes priority against national myths and prejudices.

However, one could notice that the anguish of the past, albeit diminished, has not been entirely forgotten in East Central Europe. This nostalgia is currently veiled in the symbolic clothing of the traumatic events of the past. Thus, through collective processes one could experience nostalgia for past events occurred long before his birth. This is how one could explain why a young citizen 25 years of age or a prime minister aged 56 on occasion nostalgically contemplate the map of Greater Hungary.

Nostalgia tries to confirm or deny extraordinary past circumstances by currently engaging a conformist or a revivalist attitude. With the help of memory we usually confirm what our grandfathers already decided. As a consequence, in public life we act against the injustice of the past and strive to correct it by making the best use of current circumstances. The process has been described among others by F. Davis (1979), P. Sztompka (2000), R. Eyerman (2001) and more recently by J. C. Alexander (2004, 2012).

Incidentally, the Greeks invented tragedy in order to pass their experience on to the next generations. It was performed in public places to a selected public and it could be considered as one of the first cultural works in ancient society. Modernity invented collective trauma to fulfill a similar purpose.

In order to describe the transfer of political nostalgia (in this case the adoration of the historical and apostolic role of Greater Hungary) into the cultural codes of the present-day Trianon trauma, I shall first present the trauma theory. As R. Eyerman (2001) pointed out, trauma is not so much an institution (slavery) or experience (being a slave) but rather memory (remembering the servitude). P. Sztompka (2000) pointed out as well that unexpected events could be

triumphal or traumatic in the same time. However, not any suffering could turn into a trauma. Thus, with J. C. Alexander (2004, 2012) a number of conditions aggregate in order to create a trauma.

Second, I consider what happens when suffering is collectively experienced as a social or political crisis and turned into a cultural crisis which is eventually an identity crisis. Thus, the nostalgia for a glorious past is adapted to current conditions and it is also culturally expressed in various social circumstances.

Third, I describe the repertoire that is engaged to transform trauma into a cultural frame. The issue of minorities and the academic infrastructure are the vehicles that propagate the Trianon century-old sufferings. A number of opportunities, such as the resuscitation of Vienna's *fin-de-siècle* in the 1980s, offered to the Central European intellectuals the opportunity to discuss the closure of this great time with the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. How could it happen? For the Hungarians, 1900 is grandiose while 1918 is a tragedy. Against this background, somehow anticipating the 2018 European Centenary, the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán used the opportunity to remind us not what Europe has to celebrate but what Hungary has to reclaim. For Budapest there was nothing to celebrate in 2018, while the year 2020 is all about the commemoration of the tragic international context that led to the signing of the Trianon Treaty on 4 June 1920.

Fourth, I present the mechanism by which other social causes associated with collective sufferings—the Jewish Holocaust of the 1940s, the Soviet occupation at the end of WWII, the military intervention of 1956—are substituted by the collective suffering of Trianon that eventually turns into a sort of *causa prima*. Starting with the 2000s, Vienna's *fin-de-siècle* and the multinational *Mitteleuropa* are replaced with the more historical and grandiose Visegrád as well with the memory of Trianon. That is, the 1920s have replaced the 1900s and even the 1940s. The interwar period is the embodiment of the Hungarian suffering and nothing is more important. To a certain extent, rediscovering the 1920s with their culture of grandeur and the nostalgia of Visegrád has meant the end of post-socialist transition in Hungary. A new national objective should be made available to all Hungarians home and abroad.

Last but not least I evaluate the impact of the Trianon trauma on the international stage. One of the points made by trauma supporters takes aim at “the biased international context” of the 1919–1920 Peace Conference in Paris. It is thought that a sort of exaggeration of the Wilsonian principles of self-determination and self-government favored the new nation states in Central Europe at the expense of historical Austria-Hungary. Therefore, the context of the peace talks held in Paris at the end of WWI it is a good source to check such allegations. However, instead of referring to the already known official documents or media coverage, I use more recent published memoirs and private correspon-

dence. For instance, the journal and letters of the British diplomat Allen Leeper are an astonishing contribution to the debate.

For the neighboring countries, the Centenary of the Trianon Treaty has revealed the existence of a sort of European dilemma for Hungary, which has to choose between reconciliation and postponement. A hundred years after the peace settlements in Paris, Central and Eastern Europe enjoys a certain stability and most of the countries in the region look for better integration into a whole and free Europe. A better integrated Europe certainly encourages reconciliation and coming to terms with a traumatic past.

## 1. The Power of the Past: Nostalgia As a Meaning-Making Tool

UNTIL NOT so long ago, the obsession with the past has been approached with the tools of physicians or psychoanalysts. Nostalgia was considered a backward-looking stance. Living in the past is a sort of melancholy that usually requires treatment. However, a recent experiment on individuals (Routledge et al. 2012) proved that, if properly used, the past is a source of power for the present. Sociology took the collective side and maintained that nostalgia is definitely neither pathology nor depression. In this sense, F. Davis argued that the passion for the past is less related to how distant or recent events are, but to how they contrast—or rather how we make them to contrast—with events, moods and dispositions of the present (Davis 1979, 12). It means the nostalgia indeed helps us in making sense of the present. It is about who we were and how to make it a tool to be engaged in the relentless work of building, saving and reconstructing our own identity (ibid., 22).

With nostalgia, Fidesz and the conservative establishment in Hungary have made Trianon an object of concern in the present. The politics of memory advanced by Viktor Orbán took over Trianon in order to contrast it with the metaphor of historical Hungary and his own political imagination. A number of monuments reveal how important it is for the Hungarian identity to remember the humiliation of 1920, to deny it and to look for the exemplary leadership of that time that eventually saved the country's honor. Monuments dedicated to the memory of Admiral Horthy were erected in Kereki and Csókakő (2012), as well in Debrecen (2014).

“Nostalgia can be seen as not only a search for ontological security in the past, but also as a means of taking one's bearings for the road ahead in the uncertainties of the present. . . . Nostalgia can be both melancholic and utopian” (Pickering and Keightley 2006, 921). Thus, in its sociological meaning, nos-

talgia has been closely linked with the notion of collective, social and cultural memory as a way or first step in attempting to explain how memories are generated, altered, shared and eventually legitimated within particular social and cultural environments (ibid., 922). Collective memory plays the central role in defining nostalgia, as its main function is to signal there might be divergences between experience and expectation.

Facing alien designs or utopia, memory mobilizes nostalgic moods with two distinct components: retreat from the present and a retrieval of the future. Seen in this light, the Hungarian nostalgia as induced by the conservative establishment signals a divergence with the local as well the continental design currently operating in Central and Eastern Europe. It seems that Viktor Orbán does not share the multicultural past that resembles *Mitteleuropa* as he does not endorse the federalist Europe either. The historical Visegrád and the traumatic Trianon have somehow combined in competing against a culturally homogenous *Mitteleuropa* as well a politically integrated European Union.

Therefore, the Trianon trauma as retrieved after 2010 uses nostalgia as a critical tool to distinguish between positive, productive, and active uses of the past (Pickering and Kneightley 2006, 938). Being just a mood, a predisposition, something like a collective emotion of the past, nostalgia, as any human emotion, is neither rational nor reflexive. It has the potential to be progressive, to offer a future or just a sense of it. One could see it in the public discourses on the importance of history, on the significance of values, or in the attendance of religious processions and the like. Fidesz somehow reinvented much of the conservative and nostalgic repertoire of Hungarian politics, most probably with the potential of turning it into a positive or even a progressive if not a utopian future.

## 2. On the Sufficient Conditions of Cultural Trauma

**I**N DESCRIBING the transformation of Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall, P. Sztompka (2000) pointed out that historical events could be equally triumphal and traumatic. As such, the year 1918 is perceived as triumphal by most of the European nations and as traumatic by those defeated or downright dismembered. When sufferings occur, there is indeed some ground to look for a social trauma. The question is, what are the necessary and sufficient conditions to talk about a cultural trauma?

If nostalgia is rather contemplative, trauma calls for action to remove the source of the pain or to compensate for it. J. C. Alexander pointed out that, in order to make the individual and group sufferings a collective trauma, it is necessary to employ cultural work. Collective action means there is a central narrative

which is multiplied by the media techniques for various audiences and performed in public spaces, mentioned in the names of squares and streets, transferred in movies, books and cartoons. Thus, trauma turns into an identity narrative of everyday life (Alexander 2012, 4).

Other authors also suggest that trauma narratives represent an interplay between personal stories and culture and, therefore, are indeed cultural constructions (Kienzler 2008, apud Mohatt et al. 2014, 131). Sometimes they even give space for utopia about the past with the associated exaggerations in the present time. It seems that this is the power of memory, as it is able to reconstruct the trauma of past events within the nowadays social and cultural context that, most likely than not, determines what is to be remembered and how to interpret it.

Mohatt et al. argued that

*historical trauma can be understood as consisting of three primary elements: a “trauma” or wounding; the trauma is shared by a group of people, rather than individually experienced; the trauma spans multiple generations, such that contemporary members of the affected group may experience trauma-related symptoms without having been present for the past traumatizing event(s).* (Mohatt et al. 2014, 129)

Sufferings and shared anger over the generations make trauma a public narrative indeed.

J. C. Alexander suggests there should be at least five elements or conditions of a cultural trauma, understood as the collective feeling that members of a community have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and charging their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways (Alexander 2016, 131). Thus, there are a number of necessary conditions of a cultural trauma: there is a group that experienced a horrible event considered as such by the members of a community, stigma and marginalization have left an irrefutable imprint on group consciousness, and these experiences are transferred into the group memory which eventually reshapes collective identity (Alexander 2012, 6).

*Intellectuals, artists, politicians, and social movements leaders create narratives about social suffering. Projected as ideologies that create new ideal interests, trauma narratives can trigger significant repairs in the civil fabric. . . . My concern is with traumas that become collective. They can become so if they are conceived as wounds to social identity. This is a matter of intense cultural and political work.* (Alexander 2012, 14)

Taking into account the literature on trauma that has developed to a great extent after 1990 in Central and Eastern Europe, one could notice how much the

Hungarian trauma narrative has been fostered and then insinuated itself in the cultural practice in the past decade or so. The Trianon trauma, as constructed and performed in public spaces, is close to the definition of cultural trauma.

Previously, other authors called it “the Trianon complex,” meaning that issues of the past generate a sort of solidarity in the search for a compensation nowadays (Michela and Vörös 2013). Essentially, the ascent to power of the Fidesz political party is associated with turning the past into a good reason to look for a better future and with transforming the memory of Trianon into a national cause. The Treaty of Trianon is therefore considered a collective suffering, as it stigmatized the historical role of Hungary in Central and Eastern Europe and transferred past greatness into the collective memory that defines the Hungarian identity.

Hence, the nostalgia for apostolic Hungary keeps the dream alive and adapts it to the current conditions in Europe.

### 3. The Hungarian Trauma Reservoir and Repertoire

**H**UNGARIAN SUFFERING occurred at the beginning of the interwar period, it was somehow frozen during the Cold War and it has been revived soon after the early days of freedom made possible the exercise of collective memory. In 2010 the Parliament in Budapest decided that Trianon should be officially commemorated. In its current version, the Trianon trauma is constructed in such a manner that the sufferings of the past are included in the social practices. Thus, trauma is played as part of daily life in various social encounters, it is written in textbooks, transferred in the literature, mentioned in street names, it is officially commemorated and internationally promoted. A number of vectors and social avenues such as diaspora (minorities) and education are used to keep it alive.

In this manner the real or just imagined suffering is turned into a collective thing, it is stimulated as a source of emotion and collective adoration and eventually transformed into a sense of cultural belonging.

As in the 1920s, the prevailing content of the trauma is related to the minorities. It is claimed that every Hungarian family has at least one member affected by the Trianon trauma. It is worth mentioning that the Hungarian minorities in (Czecho)Slovakia, Yugoslavia (Serbia), Ukraine and Romania are mentioned every time the Trianon trauma is brought up.

Currently, minorities enjoy rights and obligations as established by the Council of Europe and the OSCE. The EU also has high standards on minorities. In spite of that, the Fidesz minority policy looks for cultural autonomy abroad

and promotes a sort of all-encompassing Hungarian community in the so-called Carpathian Basin. It is quite astonishing how Fidesz has managed to revive the policy of culturally contested spaces and it is no less astounding how Viktor Orbán reminds us the political leadership of the 1920s.

There must be a sort of reservoir that feeds the Hungarian leadership of almost every generation since 1920. K. Gerner pointed out the education system, reorganized after Trianon, starting with the science of history, which, with some hiatuses in the 1950s, has remained part of the core teaching ever since (Gerner 2007, 91).

On the other hand, G. Schöpflin, a Hungarian refugee and professor at the University College of London, mentioned that the Hungarian empire survived Trianon due to the Diaspora in Western Europe and the US, which cultivated the memory of past grandeur during the difficult time of the Cold War.

Thus, a lasting education infrastructure at home that preserved its core functions in spite of political turmoil and a highly educated and influential Diaspora have managed to keep and then resuscitate the memory of an imagined glorious past, only to put it in the service of a rather utopian future.

#### 4. Substitution of Other Social Traumas

AS MENTIONED earlier, in the late 1980s, *Mittleuropa* dominated the public debate about the future of Eastern Europe. Soon after 1989, the writings of Milan Kundera and György Konrad became the textbooks of the Hungarian post-communism. The nostalgia for the Viennese *Secession*, the paintings of Klimt, the *Art Nouveau* architecture, the novels of Stefan Zweig and Claudio Magris and, last but not least, the multicultural Austro-Hungarian *fin-de-siècle* insinuated themselves into the souls and minds of the Central European intellectuals. As Kundera mentioned in 1986, Central Europe was geopolitically part of the East but it never left the cultural environment of the West. No wonder that as soon as 1990 the laboratory of post-communist culture—the Central European University—established its headquarters in Budapest.

However, starting with 2001 and 2004 and clearly with the ascent to power of Fidesz in 2010, the Hungarian preference has moved towards the interwar time. In the public discourse, *Mittleuropa* is replaced with the more significant Visegrád, and the references to Trianon have become the prevailing subject. Multicultural Vienna was replaced with the ethno-cultural regional and supra-national contour of the Hungarian speaking-nation in Central Europe. Admiral Horthy and a few other interwar characters replaced Kundera and Konrad. Shortly after, the Central European University took refuge in the West (Vienna) as its founder did in the 1930s.



É. Kovács pointed out that a sort of *Historikerstreit* or controversy has been somehow responsible for such polarization (Kovács 2016, 527–528). After all, Viktor Orbán and Fidesz were the champions of democratization and integration since the early 1990s. It is an evolutionary change that put the Hungarian conservatives on the other side of the transition in the 2000s. The Trianon trauma certainly contributed, as it was declared a national trauma and other social sufferings were considered secondary. Thus, the intellectual dispute between András Gerő from the Central European University and Ignác Romsics from the Hungarian Academy has generated a public debate on the significance of the Jewish Holocaust, the Trianon trauma, and the Stalinist persecution during the communist regime.

É. Kovács contends the Trianon trauma has been constructed as a self-understandable historical happening, in spite of a rather amorphous social memory and a weak historical resonance among ordinary Hungarians. Political traumas seem to be more important than social consequences, and the wounds of World War I were minimized by the Trianon metaphor. É. Kovács thinks that any discussion on this subject should have started with the recognition of the suffering occurred, in Trianon's name, during World War II. On the other hand, K. Gerner pointed out that Fidesz has managed to mobilize a good part of the public in the service of the Trianon cause. A sort of mutual distrust it is considered to have emerged between the Hungarian elite and most of the minorities, suspected of having abandoned the country's political ideals.

For the next period of time, a more balanced domestic policy should somehow bring more stability and predictability to Hungarian politics. The sooner the better. A liberal coalition of big cities is expected to generate this change.

## 5. Hungary's European Dilemma

**M**INORITIES HAVE been lately labeled as the *soft* dimension of Hungarian politics. This is because minorities are important in Europe and, therefore, the European standards have certainly improved the status of minorities in all countries neighboring Hungary, except perhaps in Ukraine, where specific conditions apply. However, the Trianon dilemma continues to be the *hard* dimension of the Hungarian politics.

In 2018, the European World War I centennial somehow precipitated the Trianon-related decisions made by Budapest. For all interested parties and for Hungary as well, the Paris Peace Conference ensured the stability and continuity of the European political order as established at the end of World War I. It is a long lasting peace deal that survived the next war and the Cold War as well.

Therefore, its centennial was properly celebrated in the whole of Europe. Yet, a number of publications questioned the fairness of those decisions. The treaty Hungary concluded with the Allied Powers on 4 June 1920 in the Palace of Trianon is no exception.

From a documentary point of view, the centennial celebration was a good opportunity to review already published documents but also to study new ones. Memoirs and diaries have lately complemented the official documents. It emerged once again that the Paris Peace talks were intense, lasting more than 12 months and the negotiations were informed by qualified technical expertise for each delegation. It is quite illustrative to see how the delegations approached the work at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919.

Writing about Trianon, G. Palsky recently mentioned the instrumental role the French geographer Emmanuel de Martonne played in drawing the new borders (Palsky 2010, 111). He thinks de Martonne offered a subjective point of view as inspired by the French geographical school.

Indeed, there were two prevailing geographical schools that offered their knowledge to the Peace Conference. The key question was how to decide on the various former imperial provinces in Central Europe and the Balkans. The German school of *Anthropogeographie*, as developed at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by F. Ratzel, maintained that natural borders should somehow determine the shape of provinces. Rivers, valleys and mountains could eventually be political frontiers as well. The French school, as inspired by Vidal de la Blache under the name *géographie sociale*, considered the provinces as autonomous regions, as “pays” in themselves. The criteria to determine the geographical extension of a “pays” was the ethnographical balance between the stable population and the fluctuating one. That limited or even excluded the former imperial administration and, therefore, the numerically superior stable population, mainly from the rural areas, eventually made the difference. Yet, C. Benoist, the leader of the French group of advisers, complained that their work was to a great extent neglected by politicians and, therefore, most of it was useless (Palsky 2010, 116).

The British attitude was, at the beginning, distinctly favorable to the Habsburg Monarchy, which had provided stability and predictability to the old generation of politicians and civil servants. However, this attitude changed as a new generation of politicians and diplomats considered it important for the peace and stability of Europe that new democracies should be built in Central and Eastern Europe (Cartledge 2011, 6).

Hence, the British delegation, otherwise considered sympathetic to the Hungarian expectations, maintained that technical advisers were actually precise and effective in informing the political decisions, taking into account that the borders on the new map of Europe were eventually much closer to the actual eth-

nographic divisions than ever before (Charles Seymour *Memoirs*, 1951, apud Palsky 2010, 118).

In the British delegation, Allen Leeper played an important technical role, as one of the few to have travelled to the region and to know it directly. His letters were recently investigated and they show the thorough work he performed. A good knowledge of the Russian occupied province of Bessarabia (nowadays the Republic of Moldova) helped him to report to the Council in Paris on the realities in the field. The Scottish geographer Alan G. Ogilvie, that traveled in the region as well, submitted to the British delegation the maps that informed the Trianon deal. We are lately informed by their private correspondence and memoirs that these maps were discussed, modified and redrawn with the contribution of American experts (especially Isaiah Bowman) a few years before the break of the WW I. Győri and Withers revealed that British and American geographers had actually been cooperating since 1912, when a number of other European geographers were invited to the us (Győri and Withers 2019, 2).

To conclude, the Versailles peace system was an expression of the Allies' political will that put the ideals of peace and reconciliation ahead of their personal or national wishes. It seems quite eloquent delegations made best use of their expertise and alleged influences were diminished to a great extent. Nowadays, one could find it unproductive to transfer political responsibilities to the technical advisers. Therefore, if there is a dilemma for a European country as to whether it should follow the path of reconciliation and integration or instead pursue revisionist policies, this is just an exception. If there really is a Trianon trauma, then it should be healed within a whole and free Europe.

□

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## Abstract

### From Political Nostalgia to Cultural Trauma? Hungary's European Dilemma a Hundred Years After Trianon

This study uses a sociological perspective in order to illustrate the transfer of Hungary's political nostalgia into the cultural trauma of the Trianon Treaty. The author describes the collective journey that persuades domestic and foreign audiences to observe the making of a new narrative by using the legendary ingredients of the past. In the process, the Hungarian Diaspora is playing a surprising active role. Along the road, other narratives—the 1940's deportations, the Holocaust and the Soviet invasion of 1956—are substituted by the collective sufferings generated by the international decision of 4 June 1920 that eventually turned into a sort of cultural trauma. Hungary's post-socialism tends to be inspired by the interwar period once again and therefore to become revisionist and litigious. However, taking into account the current quarrels between Budapest and the European institutions in Brussels, the author evaluates the possibility of Hungary solving its European dilemma and looking for a reconciliation with its neighbors. It seems quite reasonable that parochial wishes should not to clash with the European ones.

## Keywords

Treaty of Trianon, Hungary, cultural trauma, nostalgia, revisionism, reconciliation