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# The Importance of the Treaty of Trianon



Trianon, 4 June 1920.

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**C**ELEBRATIONS, ANNIVERSARIES and commemorations are part of civilized peoples' everyday life. We keep in our mind both defeats and victories, and from time to time we revive their memory because they all are a source from which we can learn. There are political regimes and peoples which emphasize tragedies, and there are others that glorify achievements. Romanians have never dwelt upon their historical failures—and there have been quite a few of those over the course of time!—preferring to remember victories, sometimes too vividly. On the contrary, our Serbian neighbors, for instance, turned the tragic battle of Kossovopolje of 1389 (after which the Turks assumed control over the region) into a moment of reference for their national identity and a symbol of their sacrifice for the faith. Our Hungarian neighbors chose to turn certain defeats in their history into important events or even national holidays: for instance, in the history of Hungary the Modern Era begins in 1526, when the “disaster” of Mohács took place; 15 March 1848 (when, among other things, the union of Transylvania with Hungary was decided) marks the glory

of a defeated revolution; 23 October 1956 is the date of another violently stifled revolution, this time by the Soviet tanks; 4 June 1920 is the day of the “catastrophe” of Trianon, etc.

Lately we have been hearing the name Trianon associated with the signing of a peace treaty a century ago. At the end of World War I, the winning powers, acting together, concluded separate treaties with every single defeated state. That is why, between 1919 and 1920, in Paris and nearby, five documents were signed to officially put an end to the war. The Treaty of Trianon is the last of these five. It is called so after the Grand Trianon Palace, located near the sumptuous Palace of Versailles. If this treaty had not been signed there by the Allied and Associated Powers and Hungary, few Romanians would have probably heard of Trianon. The document settled all the problems between the winners and Hungary, which, when the war started, had not been a subject of international law. Actually, for the first time after about half a millennium (1541–1920), Hungary became again an officially recognized independent country owing to this very document. The treaty enshrined, among many other things, the separation from the territory of historical Hungary (“Hungary as it was under the Crown of Saint Stephen”) of all the territories (counties, provinces) in which Hungarians were a minority from the demographic point of view. These territories were mainly Croatia and Vojvodina, Slovakia, and Transylvania, which were recognized as belonging to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, Czechoslovakia and Kingdom of Romania, respectively. By these decisions (as well as by those of the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye) “historical Hungary” lost about two thirds of its territory in favor of the majority populations, which had chosen their destiny in 1918. This document, whose provisions are generally still valid, is presented by the Hungarian propaganda as “the greatest historical injustice done by the Great Western Powers to eternal Hungary, the ruler of the Carpathian Basin.” This is why many Hungarians consider the Treaty of Trianon as the moment of disintegration for Hungary, after the Great Powers “grabbed” “its historical provinces,” namely Transylvania, Slovakia, Croatia, etc.

What is the reality? Many say today, in the context of relativism, that truth is whatever everyone considers true, which obviously lacks logical consistency. When we speak of the new architecture of Central and Southeastern Europe after World War I, it is imperative to make the distinction between factual and legal realities. Actually, the entire old order of the region collapsed in the year 1918, when four empires fell (German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman) and new states were formed, or others were completed according to ethnic and national criteria. The cause of this huge change was, undoubtedly, the peoples’ fight for national emancipation, initiated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and culminating in the “century of nationalities” and in the 1900s. The occasion of

the imminent change was, no doubt, the world war, “the Great War,” which favored the fulfillment of the peoples’ wish, as the Great Powers in the area were defeated. Rightfully, the new order was accepted at international level in the years 1919–1920, through the already mentioned peace treaties.

For the Romanians, Czechs, Slovaks, Croats, etc., the culmination of the changes was the autumn of the year 1918. The Treaty of Trianon means for these peoples only the completion of the process, through the international consecration of a pre-existing reality. In these peoples’ vision, the reunification of Romania, Slovakia (with the creation of Czechoslovakia) and Croatia (in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes) was not done by the Great Powers, but by the peoples themselves, through their elites, as a result of the national emancipation movements. It is crystal clear for anyone that it was not Trianon that decided the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but the nations that no longer wanted to live in the “prison of nations.”

For the Romanians, the Treaty of Trianon cannot be considered the document that achieved the union of Transylvania and Kingdom of Romania, as it only made an older reality official at international level. The union of the Romanian provinces, Transylvania included, with Kingdom of Romania was not the consequence of the treaties concluded by the victors with the defeated states (and Trianon is no exception); it was due to the national emancipation movements culminating with the decisions made at Chişinău, Czernowitz, and Alba Iulia. The Treaty of Trianon did not decide the union of Transylvania with Kingdom of Romania, it only recognized, at international level, the deed accomplished by the Romanians in 1918. The new borders of united Romania were recognized not only at Trianon, but also at Saint-Germain-en-Laye (Romania’s northeastern border with Poland), and at Neuilly-sur-Seine (the southeastern border with Bulgaria); for the Romanians, Trianon is therefore only a juridical episode connected to the western border of Romania (very important, no doubt) in the epic of the Great Union.

Consequently, the actions organized by Romania on the centennial of the Treaty of Trianon are generally correlated with those of the countries and peoples liberated in 1918 from Austro-Hungarian domination. All these actions refer to the international recognition of the decisions made by the peoples, to the new European architecture after the Great War, which was not the decision of the Great Powers; all the Great Powers did was to recognize the actions of the liberated peoples.

Hungary’s main arguments against the Trianon Treaty were based, in 1920, on historic rights, on the law of the sword, on the “civilizing mission of the Hungarians in the Carpathian Basin.” In fact, in certain documents circulated

by official circles in Budapest, they repeat even today the racist idea that, in 1920, the Great Western Powers gave Transylvania, the “pearl of the Kingdom of Hungary” to “uncivilized Balkan Romania.” The arguments of Romania, Slovakia, Croatia, etc. focus on the ethnicity and the will of the majority population, on the right of peoples to decide their own destiny (the right of peoples to self-determination, supported and imposed by the United States President Woodrow Wilson). Therefore, these are two completely different visions. In international law, in 1919–1920 and nowadays, Hungary’s arguments were not and are not valid, they do not belong to the arsenal of democracy and were not recognized by the international community. Hungary’s position is singular, isolated, while Romania’s position is shared by several actors in the international configuration. Europe’s new political and territorial order is in place since 1918, validated by historical practice, and even if the decision-makers who participated in the Trianon conference of June 1920 had wanted to change that order, they would not have been able to do so.

The decisions to recognize the new states and the ones unified in 1918 were (largely) revalidated after World War II, then later at the Helsinki Conference (1975), and also after the fall of the Iron Curtain. For us, for Romanians, it is painful that the consequences of the Ribbentrop–Molotov Pact (concluded on 23 August 1939) remained in force; although it was denounced, the pact still produces effects. But this serious fact has nothing to do with Trianon. Romania’s western border with Hungary, with the exception of the 1940–1944 episode (which took place under a totalitarian fascist regime, condemned by all international courts), has remained unchanged for a century, being considered the expression of democratic relations and of international principles of peaceful coexistence.

The union of Transylvania with Romania was not the act of an elite (although the elite voted for it), but a democratic act with the character of a plebiscite: 1,228 delegates, elected and appointed by the administrative-territorial units, political parties, churches, professional associations, women, students etc., voted on 1 December 1918 not only in their name, as individual votes, but also in the name of millions of Romanians who delegated their right to vote through documents called “credentials” (recently published in the eight volumes of the monumental work entitled *Building the Great Union*, compiled by Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca). Therefore, one vote cast in Alba Iulia was actually the vote of tens and hundreds of Romanians, and all the 1,228 votes represent, in fact, the position of all the Transylvanian Romanians. According to the Austro-Hungarian censuses, the Romanians accounted for the absolute majority of Transylvania (including Banat, Crişana, and Maramureş).

After any war, anywhere and anytime in the world, there are winners and losers. The latter were always punished, and the former decided the fate of the countries in their area. But for the first time in history, the winners of the First World War were forced to take into account, overwhelmingly, the will of the peoples involved. The losers, as always, had their frustrations and sufferings, but, in the special case of the Hungarian people, a part of the elite (that of noble extraction) cultivated the mentality of a victim compelled to seek revenge. This frustration of the Hungarian people is real and painful, but its endless cultivation deepens tensions in the area. Consequently, every action taken by Romania in relation with the centennial of Trianon must be understood distinctly, should be treated without bitterness and be placed in the general context of the recognition of the new architecture of Europe through the treaties of Paris (Versailles, Saint-Germain-en Laye, Neuilly-sur-Seine, Trianon, and Sèvres) of 1919–1920. Romania, since 1918, has legitimized itself in the world, and, since then, this legitimation has been recognized by the international courts and reiterated until today.

History is interpreted differently by different peoples. Romanians, Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Croats, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians and many other Europeans celebrate the peace treaties of Paris precisely because they accepted the decisions of the peoples to form new national and federal states, on the ruins of the German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman empires. It is true that these new realities were accepted by the Allied and Associated Powers, who were victorious in the First World War. But this has been happening ever since the world began. Over the past hundred years, other international binding decisions have confirmed—broadly—the treaties of 1919–1920 and the existence of national states in the region. Therefore, any nostalgic discussion about old empires and multinational states becomes obsolete. Especially since today, the states and the peoples of the former communist “Eastern Europe” militate for the fullest possible integration into the European Union. Or, more precisely, in Romania’s vision, they should do so.

There is a difference in accent between the official positions of Hungary and Romania, but the accent is serious. Romania sees the new political-territorial chessboard of Central Europe as part of a process carried out by the peoples (1918) and legitimized by the Great Powers (1919–1920), while Hungary sees only the legitimation and only the 1920 moment, completely neglecting the role of the peoples.

Obviously, the Treaty of Trianon has its international and national importance which is difficult to estimate and impossible to minimize: it legitimized the just will of the Romanian people and consecrated a valuable legacy at inter-

national level. The peoples to whom historic justice was granted by the Treaty of Trianon seek to defend and uphold it, since it was confirmed by all the international treaties that followed. In other words, with the exception of the Russian Empire (always rebuilt under various forms), all the other empires taken apart by peoples in 1918 remain only a historical memory. Instead, the states of the Poles, Romanians, Czechs, Slovaks, Croats, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, etc., created, recreated, unified or reborn after the First World War, have endured and still exist today.



### **Abstract**

#### The Importance of the Treaty of Trianon

When we speak of the new architecture of Central and Southeastern Europe after World War I, it is imperative to make the distinction between factual and legal realities. Actually, the entire old order of the region collapsed in the year 1918, when four empires fell (German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman) and new states were formed, or others were completed according to ethnic and national criteria. The cause of this huge change was, undoubtedly, the peoples' fight for national emancipation, initiated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and culminating in the "century of nationalities" and in the 1900s. Obviously, the Treaty of Trianon has its international and national importance which is difficult to estimate and impossible to minimize: it legitimized the just will of the Romanian people and consecrated a valuable legacy at international level.

### **Keywords**

Trianon, Romania, Hungary, Transylvania, Woodrow Wilson