

Factors driving national building process after 1918 and their implications

The end of the First World War brought about fundamental metamorphosis of geopolitical order in Central-East European region. Following the peace treaties, Poland regained its independence once again, after being torn between Russia, Germany and Austro-Hungarian Empire for over a century. Czechoslovakia, a country no one had heard of before, came to existence. But not everyone was so lucky – Hungary lost over a half of its area thanks to the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, that would, up to these days, be regarded as a cultural¹ and historical trauma (as described e.g. in Miklós Mészöly's essays).²

The transformation of multinational frame of Austro-Hungarian Empire into several autonomous national states posed new questions and begged for new, both theoretical and institutional, solutions. It became necessary to rethink the conceptions of citizenship, nation, identity – as well as their mutual relatedness and their connection to current conditions. Each of these new states had to engage not only in stabilization of its institutional and administrative structures but also in search for historical narratives that would legitimize its existence and provide citizenry with means to attain at least some degree of social coherence. And each of them had to cope with different situation after the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire – like the constitution of the “Czechoslovak culture”³ at the moment when number of German-speaking inhabitants of the new state surpassed those who would become Slovaks. It became a necessary task to provide people with symbolic constructions that would incite will and loyalty, and motivate them to contribute. Nationalism and national mythologies established themselves among the prime forces that facilitated the development of post-1918 states.

But what to do with “the others”, those who did not fit the national frame? What was to be the position of Romanians in Hungary or Ukrainians in Poland, where one should have put the relatively

¹ On cultural trauma see e.g. Alexander, J. C. 2012. *Trauma: A Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

² Mészöly, M. 1995. *Domov a svet*. Bratislava: Kalligram.

³ See Leff, C. S. 1999 „Czech and Slovak Nationalism in the Twentieth Century.” p. 113 in Sugar, P. F. *Eastern European Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*. Washingtgon: The American University Press.

autonomous communities such as Ruthenians or Roma people, and what to do with the Jews, the “liberal pariahs” of the Empire, as Ernest Gellner⁴ once called them? It was unclear what role, if any at all, should minorities play in both internal structures and public spheres of the newly established states.⁵ Would they pose a threat to national security, or is heterogeneity of cultures and cultural identities a sign of a healthy society?

Answers and solutions that had, or sometimes had not, been found, profoundly influenced both internal and foreign policies of states and later to a certain degree determined positions that their representatives and citizens would take at times of crisis, such as the Second World War. They lie at the roots of such processes as the short-lived Slovak war state’s treatment of its Jewish inhabitants or formation of Poland’s vast underground movement.

It would be unreasonable to regard the symbols and attitudes that drove the processes of nation building during the first half of 20th century as irrelevant to current political and social situation. Residues of metaphors, frames and classification systems that came to existence during this era are still being called on and to this day inform our thinking and perception. They are present not only explicitly and vulgarly during meetings of nationalist initiatives like the Hungarian Guard,⁶ but also in phenomena like the nostalgic collective memory of “the golden times” – both of the first Czechoslovak Republic and Slovak war state. What is the finest achievement of nationalism, though, is the naturalization of national state that still tacitly permeates public discourses.

⁴ Gellner, E. 1998. *Language and solitude: Wittgenstein, Malinowski and the Habsburg Dilemma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press.

⁵ See e.g. Egry, G. 2014. „National Interactions: Hungarians as Minorities and Changes in the Definition of Who Is Hungarian in the 1930s“ in Ripp, Z. *Influences, Pressures Pro and Con, and Opportunities. Studies on Political Interactions in and Involving Hungary in the Twentieth Century*. Budapest: Napvilag Kiado.

⁶ See e.g. „János Volner: Hungarian Guard will flourish if Jobbik comes to power“ in *The Budapest Beacon* [online] [Retrieved on 1. 6. 2015] Approachable from: <http://budapestbeacon.com/public-policy/janos-volner-hungarian-guard-will-flourish-if-jobbik-comes-to-power>