



László Szarka

## Hungarian National Minority Organizations and the Role of Elites between the Two World Wars

Addenda to the History of Minority Nationalism  
in Central and Eastern Europe

This article examines the history of the Hungarian minorities formed in three multiethnic nation states between the two world wars: the Czechoslovak Republic, the Kingdom of Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia and the Kingdom of Romania. The analysis focuses on options for political organization and the role of ethnic parties and political elites, highlighting the example of János Esterházy and his work as chairman of the Czechoslovakian Hungarian ethnic party. It specifically discusses Hungary's "kin-state" relations with the minorities and its revisionist foreign policy. It also shows the key role of assimilation policy in the ethno-political model of the three nation states. In these twenty short years, the separate interests of the three Hungarian minority groups, as distinct from the kin state and the domicile states, emerged only at the conceptual level. The minority Hungarian ideologies which forged a program out of micro-community and multiethnic ideas—Romanian Transylvaniam, "Upper Hungarian autochthonism" and "couleur locale" in (former) Southern Hungary—found no support from either Budapest or the governments of the three nation states.

Keywords: minority nationalism, "triadic nexus" of nationalism, ethnic parties, ethnopolitical models, Hungary, Slovakia

### *Historiographical Contexts*

After World War I the centuries-old multiethnic imperial structure of Central and Eastern Europe collapsed. The victorious great powers' subsequent support for national self-determination led to a nation-state structure of extreme ethnic complexity. The multiethnic states of Poland and Romania, the pseudo-federative Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, and the new state of Czechoslovakia all displayed the severity of the ethnic problems faced by the new Central Europe. Even the Kingdom of Hungary, despite losing two thirds of its territory, had minorities making up ten per cent of its population in 1920. The peace system of Versailles presented the autonomy-seeking Croat, Slovene, Muslim, Slovak and Ruthene "co-nationalities" with some degree of progress, if not a complete

solution, but imposed on certain groups of Germans, Hungarians, Poles, Slovenians and other nationalities a “minority” status that was hard to accept. These minorities hoped for a solution to their troubles in reunion with their national communities, through the citizenship option permitted in the peace treaty, referenda on disputed territories, and the revision of borders. Instead, the problems were soon compounded as “victorious” and “defeated” nation states developed acrimonious relations and institutionalized them in the form of the Little Entente and, later, the Pact of Rome.<sup>1</sup>

Below, we examine four aspects of self-organization among Hungarian minorities in three multiethnic nation states of Central and Eastern Europe: the Republic of Czechoslovakia, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, and the Kingdom of Romania. First we will analyze the role of minority Hungarian parties and of János Esterházy, chairman of the Czechoslovakian ethnic party, then the effects of the policies pursued by the governments of Hungary and the “nationalizing” domicile states, and finally the alternatives and dilemmas of minority self-organization.

Various narratives have emerged in Hungarian twentieth-century historical memory and historiography to describe the formations of the “divided nation” created by the 1920 Treaty of Trianon. Few of the analyses of the creation, situation and development of Hungarian minorities, however, have been taken up by historians outside Hungary. By contrast, international historiography approaches the region in the context of the nation state, which it regards as the region’s natural form of existence.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, in dealing with the twentieth-century minorities of Central and Eastern Europe, international historians inevitably apply different attitudes and concepts than their Hungarian, Romanian, Czech, Slovak, Serbian, Croatian or Slovenian counterparts.<sup>3</sup> In Hungarian public opinion, national memory

and historiography, the subject is dominated by the ethnic injustice of the way the borders of the new Hungarian nation state were marked out and codified in 1919 and 1920, and by the trauma dealt to Hungarians by the 1920 Treaty of Trianon.<sup>4</sup> Although these were treated in various different ways, a long time passed before a more sophisticated account emerged, going beyond the injustices of the 1920 peace treaty and taking into account the factors and processes behind the formation of these nation states.<sup>5</sup> Although a few emigrant and minority Hungarian authors during the interwar period did discuss how the errors, transgressions and missed opportunities of the Hungarian political class contributed, internally and externally, to the decay of the Habsburg Monarchy and the 1867–1918 dual state of Austro–Hungary, the public mind in Hungary was too concerned with the loud demands for border revision and a post-colonial discourse-based revisionist cult to give any thought to “self-revision.”<sup>6</sup> National historiographies are still very divided as regards the formation of the Central and Eastern European nation states in the early twentieth century. Hungarian and Austrian historians stress the great powers’ prescriptions for constitutional reorganization on nation-state lines and the contradiction, bias and injustice inherent in these. They draw attention to the conditions and conflicts imposed on the large number of resulting “national minorities,” and point out how the strategic aspects behind the territorial allocations set into the peace treaties deepened the region’s economic defencelessness. By contrast, Polish, Czech, Slovak, Serbian,

1988); Nándor Bárdi et al., eds., *Minority Hungarian Communities in the Twentieth Century* (Boulder, Colo.: Atlantic Research Publications, 2011).

4 The Treaty of Trianon was signed between the Allies of World War I and Hungary in 1920. Post-Trianon Hungary had 72 percent less territory and 64 percent less population than the pre-war kingdom. See Ignác Romsics, *Dismantling of Historic Hungary: the Peace Treaty of Trianon, 1920*, trans. Mario D. Fenyo (Wayne, NJ.: Center for Hungarian Studies and Publications, 2002). A debate on the Treaty of Trianon in the left-liberal weekly *Élet és Irodalom* in 2010–11 is summarized in Ferenc Laczó, *The ‘Trianon’-Debate in the Hungarian Left-Liberal Weekly ‘Élet és Irodalom’*, accessed August 29, 2013, <http://www.imre-kerteszkolleg.uni-jena.de/index.php?id=414>.

5 For this, see e.g. Romsics, “The Dismantling of Historic Hungary”, in *Essays on World War I: Total War and Peacemaking, a Case Study on Trianon*, ed. Bela B. Kiraly, Peter Pastor, and Ivan Sanders (New York: Brooklyn College Press, 1982).

6 On revisionism, see Miklós Zeidler, *A revíziós gondolat* (Pozsony: Kalligram, 2009); on the inescapable need for Hungarian self-revision, see the book written in Vienna and published in London by Oszkár Jászi, minister for nationalities in the 1918–1919 Republic of Hungary: Oszkár Jászi, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Hungary* (London: P. S. King and Son, 1924); for a view from the minorities, see the highly influential essay by Sándor Makkai, who was a Reformed Church bishop in Transylvania between the two world wars. Sándor Makkai, *Magunk revíziója* (Csíkszereda: Pro Print, 1998 [1931]).

1 There are many misunderstandings and disputes surrounding the concept of “national minority”. Hungarians tend to use it in the sense of part of the nation, whereas it appears in the constitutions of Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Ukraine and Romania, primarily as meaning – in our case Hungarians – a group belonging to a neighbouring nation but divided from it by a national frontier and living in the country as a minority. Slovakia uses the expression “minority of a nationality” (*národnostná menšina*), and Austria, “traditional ethnic group” (*Volksgruppe*).

2 We should also, however, mention the increasing frequency of positive exceptions in recent times. See for example Holly Case, *Between States: The Transylvanian Question and the European Idea during World War II* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009), accessed October 21, 2013, <http://www.sup.org/book.cgi?id=9197>.

3 One of the comprehensive overviews of twentieth-century Hungarian minority history is Stephen Borsody, ed., *The Hungarians: A Divided Nation* (New Haven: Yale Center for International and Area Studies,

Croatian, Slovenian and Romanian historians highlight the realization of the national self-determination provided by international law and the justification for dismantling the multiethnic Habsburg, Ottoman and Russian empires.<sup>7</sup>

### *Communities of Necessity, Destiny or Practicality?*

The most dramatic Hungarian-minority reading of the consequences of the Treaty of Trianon appeared under the title *Kiáltó szó* [Appeal] published by representatives of the newly-organizing Transylvanian Hungarian political elite. Cast into a minority position following the break-up of historical Hungary only half a century after reunification with Transylvania (1867), Transylvanian Hungarians turned their sights on Transylvanian autonomy.<sup>8</sup> The fortunes of the Hungarian minorities in Romania, Czechoslovakia, and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes form a dominant strand in Hungarian twentieth-century history. The legal grievances of the minority Hungarian communities, their continuous demographic decrease, and their separation from the people, language and culture of Hungary engendered separate development tendencies, but also fired a demand for cooperation with Hungary and other groups in similar situations. The idea of the “united,” “universal,” “divided” or “multipolar” Hungarian nation was mostly latent, unspoken, coming out only through allusions in endless debates, but nonetheless became the foundation of constructive community formations.

It was difficult from the outset to interpret the minority communities’ relationship with their counterparts in post-Trianon Hungary in terms of

7 For contrary views, see Walter Hildebrandt, “Die Problematik der Nation als totalisierende Matrix im Kontext des Strukturpluralismus Südosteuropas” in *Ethnogenese und Staatsbildung in Südosteuropa*, ed. Klaus-Detlev Grothusen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974), 230–53; Ignác Romsics, *Nemzet, nemzetiség és állam Kelet-Közép- és Délkelet-Európában a 19. és a 20. században* (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2004); Gergely Romsics, *Nép, nemzet, birodalom. A Habsburg-birodalom emlékezete a német, osztrák és magyar történetpolitikai gondolkodásban, 1918–1941* (Budapest: Új Mandátum, 2010); Marián Hronský, *The Struggle for Slovakia and the Treaty of Trianon 1918–1920* (Bratislava: Veda, 2002). On the ethnic mobilization of the South Slav nations, see Mark Cornwall, “The Experience of Yugoslav Agitation in Austria–Hungary, 1914–18,” in *Facing Armageddon. The First World War Experienced*, ed. Hugh Cecil et al. (London: Cooper, 1996), 656–77.

8 “We want to build up our national autonomy in the new conditions for two million Hungarians as a foundation; the law passed in Romania has by its own free decision promised part of this to us: the decision of Alba Iulia, and the other part will be obtained by our own will and strength and the better judgement of Romania.” Károly Kós et al., *Kiáltó szó. A magyarság útja. A politikai aktivitás rendszere* (Budapest: Idegen Nyelvű Folyóiratkiadó, 1981 [Kolozsvar, 1921]), 6–11, accessed August 29, 2013, <http://www.hhrf.org/mk/802mk/802mk10.htm>.

whole and parts. It was not just that the host nation states did everything they could to restrict contacts; the regions and towns detached from the Hungarian state very quickly bolstered their multiethnic character. Bilingualism soon led to dissimilation or re-assimilation. The thinning of the Hungarian population in cities and peripheral areas is evidence that the twentieth-century nation states were much more effective in their pursuit of homogenization than the nineteenth-century Hungarian nation state had been.

The Carpathian Basin may be the geographical metaphor for the historic state of Hungary, but it is a fundamentally multiethnic region where stable interethnic relationships and ethnic contact zones were always accompanied by lasting double bonds and multiple identity structures, and has experienced gradual changeovers of language and identity. Much more appropriate to the constantly transforming relationship between Hungary and the Hungarian minorities after 1920—the changing relations among members of a family bearing mutual responsibility—are the concept of the “mosaic nation” and the five-legged whistle metaphor used by the two Hungarian poets Gyula Illyés and Sándor Csoóri.<sup>9</sup> Others saw the “internal” and “external” Hungarian “worlds” as being a kind of sun-and-planets system held together by cultural gravitation and linguistic cohesion. The definition of minorities as “parts of the nation,” however, inevitably ignored regional precedents, the interethnic context, the internal dynamics of community organization, and the variable nature of mutual and majority-minority relationships.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, the position of minorities has usually, throughout the last ninety years, been interpreted as ongoing retreat, shrinkage, and loss. The “moral impossibility” of the minority paradigm, which emerged in the early twentieth century in the wake of world-scale changes, imposed situations, and the homogenizing ambitions of nationalizing nation states may be described as a

9 Gyula Illyés began his career as a poet in the populist movement, where he was a dominant figure. Later, in the Kádár era, he spoke up against legal violations suffered by the minorities and in favour of the linguistic and cultural community of the universal Hungarian nation, often overstepping restrictions on what could be publicly voiced. It was as a metaphor for the latter that he used the expression “five-legged whistle”. Continuing Illyés’ work on behalf of the minorities, the poet Sándor Csoóri, through the concept of the mosaic, expressed completeness in the same sense. On the minority Hungarian aspects of Csoóri’s concept of the nation, see András Görömbei, “Az elveszített hazák csikorognak. Csoóri Sándor a kisebbségi magyarságért,” *Új Forrás* 3 (2000): 46–56, accessed September 16, 2013, <http://epa.oszk.hu/00000/00016/00053/000313.htm>.

10 Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed. Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 55–59.

permanent identity crisis and a process of depravation leading to the extinction of minority communities.<sup>11</sup>

The historical study of “external” Hungarian societies and communities has undoubtedly been most thorough in the world of culture (particularly literature, theatre, and history of ideas). Hungarian culture is generally approached as unitary or universal, with a concentration, particularly in the case of literature, on values. Set against that, the “multicentric Hungarian world” concept has occasionally—similarly to the study of Hungarian language use—spawned narratives and interpretations which incorporate the tendency to diverging development.<sup>12</sup> The political history of minorities constructed around their own political organization, the nationality policy of the Hungarian government and the minority policy of the majority nations has by now developed to fill most of the gaps in what is otherwise a continuous account. More or less the same may be said for the history of mentalities.<sup>13</sup>

The minorities developed a national memory and historical self-image that diverged in many respects from the image of minorities presented by historical constructions within Hungary.<sup>14</sup> From the outset, writers among the minorities

11 Gábor Biczó, “Megjegyzések Vetési László: Szórványstratégia – nemzetstratégia című tanulmányához,” *Magyar Kisebbség* 3, no. 21 (2003): 172–214, accessed August 29, 2013, [www.jakabffy.ro/magyarkisebbsseg/index.php?action=cimek&lapid=16&cikk=m000301.html](http://www.jakabffy.ro/magyarkisebbsseg/index.php?action=cimek&lapid=16&cikk=m000301.html).

12 The preponderance of cultural history research is related to the special role of literature among the minorities, and its power of resistance against central interference. Erzsébet Dani, “Minority Hungarian Management of Conflicting Cultural Identities in Post-Trianon Intercultural Romania as Reflected in Literature,” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 3, no. 8 (Special Issue – April 2013): 316–26, accessed August 29, 2013, [http://www.ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol\\_3\\_No\\_8\\_Special\\_Issue\\_April\\_2013/33.pdf](http://www.ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol_3_No_8_Special_Issue_April_2013/33.pdf). Hungarian-language analyses include: Ernő Gáll, *Tegnap és mai önismeret* (Bucharest: Kriterion, 1975); Béla Pomogáts, *A transzilvánizmus* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1983); Péter Cseke, *A metaforától az élet felé. Kisebbségi értelmiség – kisebbségi nyilvánosság* (Bucharest–Kolozsvár: Kriterion, 1995); András Görömbei, *Lételemzések* (Miskolc: Felsőmagyarország Kiadó, 1997).

13 On history-of-mentality approaches to minority self-interpretation see e.g. Nándor Bárdi, “Generation Groups in the History of Hungarian Minority Elites,” in *Regio – Minorities, Politics, Society* (2005): 109–40, accessed August 29, 2013, <http://epa.oszk.hu/00400/00476/00005/pdf/10.pdf>. Among Hungarian-language works see Éva Cs. Gyimesi, “Gyöngy és homok,” in idem, *Honvágy a hazában* (Budapest: Pesti Szalon, 1993); Péter Cseke, ed., *Lehet – nem lehet? Kisebbségi lételemzések (1937–1987)* (Kolozsvár: Mentor, 1995); Zsolt K. Lengyel, *A kompromisszum keresése* (Csíkszereda: Pro-Print, 2007); László Öllős, *Az egyetértés konfliktusa: A Magyar Köztársaság alkotmánya és a határon túli magyarok* (Somorja–Sámorin: Fórum Intézet, 2008).

14 In the first two decades, the principal framework for interpretation was the relationship between minority Hungarians and Hungary. Several leading thinkers in Hungary—writers and historians such as Dezső Szabó, Mihály Babits, Gyula Szekfű, László Németh, and Zsigmond Móricz—considered that Hungary’s main task was to protect minority Hungarian communities. Németh said, “after Trianon, the Hungarians have no greater task than to keep alive, in the place where they are, those of their brothers and

diverged from those in Hungary, displaying more internal criticism and greater understanding of neighboring nations and being open towards the frequently parallel, if more often opposed, nation-building by Romanians, Slovaks, Serbs, Croats, and others. In the decades between the two world wars, it was mainly minority writers on public affairs who addressed the opening of links to majority nationalities, displayed a realism derived from minority experience, and discussed the reforms and Central European orientation demanded by the minority situation.<sup>15</sup>

Only in the international historical literature did any sign appear of a supra-ethnic consensus in the assessment of the new system of shrunken or expanded nation states in the interwar period. There are as many differences regarding the role of opposition between victorious and defeated small states and the French and later German great-power interests in the historical assessment of the Central European nations as there are in the assessment of the operation, effectiveness and government performance of the nation states. In particular, Rogers Brubaker’s book on the nation states of Central and Eastern Europe between the two world wars provided an impulse to the reassessment of the process of nation-building under the constraints of the “new Europe”. The book examines Weimar Germany’s “kin state nationalism,” Poland’s “nationalizing policy” and the phenomenon of migration from Turkish and Hungarian ethnic groups which had recently been cast into minority status. It points out how the modernizing effect of the nation-state framework became the basis for the unchallenged role of nation states in the Europe of today.<sup>16</sup> Scholars and workshops concerned with Hungarian minority history, both in Hungary and elsewhere, have made considerable progress in researching and analyzing sources in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The

sisters who have fallen into foreign hands.” László Németh, “A magyar élet antinómiái,” in idem, *Sorskérdések* (Budapest: Magvető és Szépirodalmi Kiadó, 1989), 104; Szekfű and László Németh’s views are discussed by András Görömbei, “A kisebbség nembelisége. Grezsa Ferenc a határon túli magyar irodalmakról,” *Tiszatáj* 1 (2008): 84; Iván Zoltán Dénes, *Eltorzult magyar alkot. Bibó István vitája Németh Lászlóval és Szekfű Gyulával* (Budapest: Osiris, 1999); László Kósa, “A magyar nemzetudat változásai,” *Európai Utas* 4, no. 41 (2000), accessed August 29, 2013, <http://www.hhrf.org/europaiutas/20004/18.htm>.

15 This was basically the line represented by members of the Helikon circle in Transylvania. For example, Mária Berde, who set off the “Admit and Accept” (*Vallani és vállalni*) debate which reviewed Transylvanist ideas, or the leading editor of the journal Aladár Kuncz. See e.g. Aladár Kuncz, “Az erdélyi gondolat Erdély magyar irodalmában”, vols. 1–2, *Nyugat* 21 (1928): 20–21; Lajos Kántor, *Vallani és vállalni: Egy irodalmi vita és környéke (1929–1930)* (Bucharest–Kolozsvár: Kriterion, 1984); Makkai’s *Magunk revíziója* may be regarded as the basic document from the interwar period on the extended responsibility of minorities.

16 Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*, 84–86, 112–17, 156–60.

main driving forces of the formation and first period of existence of the Hungarian minorities have been thoroughly explored. Examination of the sources presents a rich and varied picture with many valuable partial results, successes and failure; awareness of these, however, is still mostly confined to the historical discourse, and we can expect a slow process of many stages before they are usefully built into public awareness.<sup>17</sup>

### *Functions of the Hungarian Ethnic Parties*

Historians of the Hungarian minorities use the term “forced community” to denote the status of Hungarian ethnic groups which—after the military events and border demarcations of the 1918–1920 period and the refusal of the neighbors and the great powers to allow referenda—found themselves on the other side of the Hungarian frontier in newly established or enlarged countries. Hungarians in Romania, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia almost without exception considered minority status to have been forced upon them by international constitutional and geopolitical changes. They hoped it would be a temporary condition, and as far as possible protested against the new constitutional arrangement. At the same time, minority Hungarian politicians in all three countries made much of their law-abiding behavior and loyalty as citizens. A sign of this was their involvement, wherever possible, in national, regional and local politics via their political parties.

The regional dimension would have had much greater significance if the Hungarian-inhabited regions had not been gerrymandered and divided into administrative units so as to keep Hungarians in a minority everywhere. The division of the Voivodina of Yugoslavia, for example, into two regions (oblasts), greatly obstructed the towns and villages of the Hungarian block along the River Tisza/Tisa from uniting to press their interests, despite Hungarian success in provincial elections.<sup>18</sup>

Even Hungarian government circles realized after the signing of the peace treaty that minority status was going to remain for a long time, or indeed permanently. Consequently, both the Hungarian government and the minority

Hungarian elites had to draw up a new doctrine of “national policy” based on the acceptance of minority status. Crucial to this were the launch, government support and internal implementation of political organizations among the minority Hungarian communities. The founders of the Romanian, Czechoslovakian and Yugoslavian Hungarian parties had to face several challenges in this respect, including increasing pressure for assimilation by the majority regime and the appearance of “activist” groups willing to sacrifice strong opposition positions for economic advantage and political collaboration. In all three countries, the minority Hungarians lived in ethnically compact and varied regions of different levels of economic development. There were great differences in wealth and mentality, and diverging life strategies. Along with the Hungarian writers László Németh of Hungary and Kornél Szenteleky of Yugoslavia, and many Transylvanian political writers, the Romanian Hungarian journalist Dezső László considered the “emotional distance” (*“lelki távolságok,”* which means “mutual alienation,”) emerging among different groups of Hungarians as the most negative new development.<sup>19</sup>

Certainly, most Hungarian-majority areas consisted of agrarian villages, and most of the Hungarian population were smallholders, farm laborers or wage laborers. In the towns, however, there was a strong and well-organized population of Hungarian and German workers. For a substantial part of the interwar period, they lent their support to the left-wing parties. The Communist Party was allowed to operate only in Czechoslovakia throughout the interwar period, but even among the Hungarians of the Voivodina, for example, where the Communist Party was banned, the election lists in some local Hungarian communities contained purely workers’ party candidates.

The land reform implemented between the wars in all three countries openly discriminated against Hungarians and other minorities, and this raised

19 “Hungarians are frighteningly uninformed; they know nothing of the world and hardly anything about themselves. They jump hither and thither in history, and do not look at the ditch they have been pushed into. We complain that the land and the people are dwindling, and we do not see what remains. (...) The fate of Hungarian minorities depends on how they can orient themselves in their situation, truly come to know themselves and their environment, and manage to transform their misfortune into a mission,” “Letter by László Németh to Károly Szirmai,” *Kalanga* 4, no. 4 (1934): 284–86, Délvidéki Digitális Könyv- és Képtár, accessed August 29, 2013, [http://dda.vmmi.org/kal1934\\_04\\_11](http://dda.vmmi.org/kal1934_04_11). Cf. László Dezső, *A kisebbségi élet ajándékai. Publicisztikai írások és tanulmányok 1929–1940* (Kolozsvár: Minerva Művelődési Egyesület–Szabadság napilap kiadója, 1997), 77–85.

17 A review of historical research into Hungarian minorities: Nándor Bárdi et al., *Minority Hungarian Communities*; on the institutionalization of Hungarian government minorities policy see Nándor Bárdi, “A budapesti kormányzatok magyarságpolitikai intézményrendszere és stratégiája,” *Kisebbségkutatás* 1 (2007): 7–18, accessed August 29, 2013, [http://www.hhrf.org/kisebbségkutatás/kk\\_2007\\_01/cikk.php?id=1769](http://www.hhrf.org/kisebbségkutatás/kk_2007_01/cikk.php?id=1769).

18 János Csuka, *A délvidéki magyarság története, 1918–1941* (Budapest: Püski Kiadó, 1995), 277–80.

support for minority parties.<sup>20</sup> There was a narrow section of Hungarian society, however, which benefited from the reform. Hungarian officials in the new state and municipal apparatus and some of the teachers and inspectors in state schools created a relatively strong Hungarian base for the majority government parties. The radical curtailment of Hungarian land ownership in all three “successor states” was fertile ground for Hungarian grievance politics: having suffered discrimination as citizens of their new country, people lost hope in the option of reaching out to the majority nation.<sup>21</sup>

The newly formed opposition Hungarian-minority parties enjoyed substantial support from Hungary, exposing them from the outset to powerful Budapest influence. When the process of adaptation and integration was beginning, this several times caused severe clashes of interest and identity. These parties—although usually basically powerless—quickly attained a dominant place in the “triadic nexus” described in detail by Rogers Brubaker. In the Central Europe of classic nation states that took form between the wars, each state was a “kin state” or “external homeland,” assuming the role of protective power with respect to its minorities in other countries, and at the same time a “nationalizing state” aiming for national homogeneity through assimilation. There was thus a mixture of roles: “nation-building,” involving defense of minorities and radical revisionism, and “nationalization,” involving hardline *etatisme* and assimilation.

“Caught between two mutually antagonistic nationalisms—those of the nationalizing states in which they live and those of the external national homelands to which they belong by ethnonational affinity though not by legal citizenship—are the national minorities. They have their own nationalism: they too make claims on the grounds of their nationality. Indeed it is such claims that make them a national minority.”<sup>22</sup>

Within the constraints of the “triadic nexus,” the minority Hungarian political parties’ community-organizing, “nation building” policies inevitably generated political conflicts in the domicile state. At the same time, the kin state, in our case Hungary, attempted to subordinate this community organization

to its own revisionist foreign policy. Thus a distinctive atmosphere of conflict immediately formed up around the operation of Hungarian ethnic minority parties in Romania, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia.

The minority parties had several basic functions, but placed the highest priority on defending rights and interests. They stood up for the individual and collective rights of the minority community they represented, challenging rights violations and promoting minority interests. The program of the Yugoslavian Hungarian Party, like those in Transylvania and Czechoslovakia, attempted to demand separate linguistic, educational, cultural and political rights, stressing the loyalty of the Hungarian minorities and taking advantage of every available legal and political avenue in the framework fixed by the peace treaty.<sup>23</sup> The same was true when it came to maintaining and developing strong links to the kin state. The main channel of Hungarian government support was the Central Office of the Alliance of Social Associations, a political coordination organization created in 1921 and supervised by the Hungarian Prime Minister, István Bethlen. An illustration of the Budapest government’s tense relations with its neighbors and its strong-handed minorities policy was the foreign ministry’s instruction (until 1925) to the Belgrade embassy to avoid direct contacts with Hungarian minority politicians.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, ethnic parties, and especially those of the Hungarian minorities, acquired regional influence in their own historical and ethnic areas: Transylvania, the Partium and the Banate in Romania; Bácska (Bačka), the Banate and Sarmia (among others) in Yugoslavia; and Slovakia and the Hungarian-inhabited southern parts of Subcarpathia in Czechoslovakia. In this sense, therefore, the Hungarian parties were simultaneously furthering ethnic (or rather national) and regional aims. At the same time, they had to create a stable ethnic electoral constituency in order to reinforce the Hungarian communities and maintain and develop a network of community institutions. This in turn required them to build contacts with civil organizations, churches and the cultural sphere and come up with programs that appealed to Hungarian intellectuals and peasants as well as Hungarians in the urban middle and working classes. This strategy was

20 Enikő A. Sajti, “Between the Two World Wars 1921–1938, Yugoslavia,” in Nándor Bárdi et al., *Minority Hungarian Communities*, 214–17.

21 On the issues of grievance politics, see Enikő A. Sajti, “A sérelmi politikától az együttműködésig,” in *Integrációs stratégiák a magyar kisebbségek történetében*, ed. Nándor Bárdi et al. (Somorja–Šamorín: Fórum Kisebbségkutató Intézet, 2006), 11–22, accessed August 29, 2013, www.mek.oszk.hu/08000/08023/08023.pdf.

22 Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*, 5.

23 Enikő A. Sajti, *Impériumváltások, revízió, kisebbség. Magyarok a Délvidéken, 1918–1941* (Budapest: Napvilág, 2004), 43–47.

24 Nándor Bárdi, *Tény és való. A budapesti kormányzatok és a határon túli magyarság kapcsolattörténete* (Pozsony: Kalligram Könyvkiadó, 2004), 40–46; Nándor Bárdi, “A budapesti kormányzatok magyarságpolitikai intézményrendszere.”

followed in particular by the Hungarian National Party of Romania (OMP) and the National Christian Socialist Party of Czechoslovakia (OKSzP).

The first Hungarian political parties—in some cases separately in Slovakia and in Subcarpathia—were formed for the parliamentary elections in Czechoslovakia in March 1920. On the national scale, the Social Democratic Party succeeded in retaining its dominance for the last time before the Communist Party was founded in 1921. This was a major challenge for the Hungarian national parties. The National Christian Socialist Party became a competitive Hungarian minority party through its sensitivity on social issues, which appealed to the conservative section of the peasantry and the workers. By contrast, the Smallholders, Craftsmen and Middle Class Party (*Kisgazda, Kézműves és Kispolgári Párt*) effectively aimed itself at better-off Hungarians in Slovakia, especially after it became the Hungarian National Party (MNP) following changes in 1925.<sup>25</sup>

In Subcarpathia, in addition to these two Czechoslovakian parties, there were the Hungarian Rights Party and the Autonomic Party of Original Inhabitants (*Őslakosok Autonóm Pártja*). These were national, right-wing parties headed without exception by politicians who had started their careers after the border changes. In 1924, they took over ten per cent of the vote under the name Rusynsko Original Inhabitants' Party (*Ruszinokóí Őslakosok Pártja*). Hungarians in Slovakia were roughly equally divided between right and left, but in Subcarpathia, right up to 1935, the Communist and Social Democratic parties had a much stronger base among Hungarians than opposition and government-aligned Hungarian parties.<sup>26</sup>

In Transylvania, the Hungarian minority's political elite first had to grasp the point of founding a national party. After the peace treaty, they soon renounced the ambivalent weapon of passivity and began to form parties of various orientations. First there was the Hungarian Alliance, more of a movement than a party, and then the Hungarian People's Party and National Party, "ethnic" or "national" parties representing Transylvanian Hungarians. The Hungarian Alliance was banned in October 1922. On December 28, 1922, the People's

Party merged with the National Party to form the OMP. From the outset, Transylvanian Hungarian politicians bolstered their electoral constituency by an inventive combination of pacts with the Romanian parties and ethnic politicizing.<sup>27</sup>

The declaration of citizens' loyalty—the citizen's oath that caused painful personal and moral contradictions, severe sacrifices and existential reorientations—restructured minority society and values in all three countries. Recognition of the new form of state and the dominance of majority society engendered a new kind of ethnic identity as the minority community faced up to, and rejected, the assimilative aspirations of the nation state. The expression "minority" did not have the negative connotations it had in Hungary between the two world wars, and simply meant "not Czechoslovakian," "not Romanian" and "not Serbian," i.e. Hungarian.

In the critical year of 1939, János Csuka, in his collection of essays *Kisebbségi sorsban* [Minority Destiny], came up with an idealized characterization of the minority existence in the extremely difficult ethno-political circumstances of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (KSCS), similar to the ideas of Transylvanism in Romania and *vox humana* in Czechoslovakia: "...a minority citizen cannot be conservative, but neither can he be extreme. He is 'minority'. He is free of all 'isms' and abstruse worldviews. The minority outlook is coherent and indivisible, separate and Hungarian."<sup>28</sup> The minority political parties became the main representative institution for the minority Hungarians as they faced up to the new situation, refusing to assimilate and endeavoring to preserve their threatened and decimated educational and cultural institutions and uphold minority rights. Parliamentary representation was in fact the area of greatest success for the Hungarians of Transylvania, Czechoslovakia and the KSCS in the interwar period. A forced community, sharing experience and suffering as a national minority, evolved into a true community whose internal organization achieved political weight—and respect from the majority—in the form of the ethnic parties.

25 Andrej Tóth, Lukáš Novotný, and Michal Stehlík, *Národnostní menšiny v Československu 1918–1938. Od státu národného ke státu národnostnímu?* (Prague: Universita Karlova, Filosofická Fakulta–Vydavatelství TOGGA, 2012), 79–87; Béla Angyal, *Érdekvédelem és önszerveződés. Fejezetek a csehszlovákiai magyar pártpolitika történetéből 1918–1938* (Galánta–Dunaszerdahely: Fórum Intézet, 2002), accessed July 17, 2013, <http://mek.oszk.hu/01800/01869/>; Csilla Fedinec: „Magyar pártok Kárpátalján a két világháború között,” *Fórum Társadalomtudományi Szemle* 1 (2007): 83–110, accessed September 10, 2013, <http://mek.oszk.hu/01800/01843/01843.pdf>.

26 Ibid.

27 György Béla, *Az Országos Magyar Párt története 1922–1938* (PhD diss., ELTE BTK, 2006), accessed August 29, 2013, <http://doktori.btk.elte.hu/hist/gyorgybela/diss.pdf>; Nándor Bárdi, “A romániai magyarság kisebbségpolitikai stratégiái a két világháború között,” *Regio* 2 (1997): 32–67; Ferenc Horváth Sz., *Elutasítás és alkalmazkodás között. A romániai magyar kisebbségi elit politikai stratégiái (1931–1940)* (Csikszereada: Pro-Print, 2007).

28 János Csuka, *Kisebbségi sorsban. A délvidéki magyarság húsz éve (1920–1940)* (Budapest: Hatodik Síp Alapítvány, 1996 [1941]), 38.

“Nationalism with a Human Face” and Hungarian Minority Policy in Czechoslovakia

The Hungarian minority parties in Czechoslovakia between the world wars (fusing into the United Hungarian Party [EMP] in 1936) tied themselves to the intentions and financial support of the “kin state”. Czechoslovakian governments set up what was undoubtedly the most permissive ethno-political model in Central and Eastern Europe between the wars, and “nationalism with a human face,” as formulated in Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk’s idea of the Czechoslovakian state was, despite mounting assimilative tendencies, to some extent preserved.<sup>29</sup> Because of the Hungarian parties’ strategy, however, relations with the Czechoslovakian government were intensely acrimonious from the beginning. The need for an autonomous political line did arise from time to time, because direct contacts with Budapest, involving constant consultations there, were a burden on daily decision-making. The Budapest government gave its blessing to actions in pursuit of minority protection, but tried to strangle at birth any “activist” ventures involving cooperation with the majority nation. Throughout the period, Hungary’s revisionist policy was best served if the Hungarian ethnic parties took the position of eternal opposition and attacked every move by the Prague government.

The Hungarian government’s ideas in Czechoslovakian Hungarian party politics and foreign relations gradually became clear in the final period of István Bethlen’s prime ministership. Rigid, hands-on control gave way to cooperation based on regular consultation, and the parties—although subordinated to Hungarian foreign policy aims—were provided with freedom of movement in internal affairs. The guiding idea behind this is clear from Budapest’s moves to encourage party fusion and coherent action in interior and foreign affairs in the early 1930s.

At a Budapest consultation called in 1930 to address the tensions between the two Hungarian ethnic parties (OKP and MNP), the Prime Minister, István Bethlen, the Foreign Secretary, Gábor Apor, and the head of the minorities

department of the Prime Minister’s Office, Tibor Pataky, made it clear that “the dismantling of Trianon is not the job of the ‘detached’ Hungarians, but of the Hungarian government.”<sup>30</sup> The minority parties were advised on the subject of the Treaty of Trianon to say, “it is unjust, but we hold it to be an established fact which we recognize. We have no intention of being irredentist and certainly not of making violent changes.”<sup>31</sup> It was made clear to the minority politicians that if they hoped for material and political support from the Hungarian government they would have to coordinate their policies. The minority party leaders were also tasked with sounding out the compatibility of the predominantly Hungarian “original inhabitants” concept with Slovakian autonomy, the central plank of Andrej Hlinka’s Slovak People’s Party, and then forcing Hlinka to declare whether or not he was willing to cooperate with the Hungarian parties.<sup>32</sup>

In January 1932, Géza Szüllő, Chairman of the National Christian Socialist Party (OKSzP), called in vain for party union; the Hungarian government leaders considered it premature.<sup>33</sup> The two Hungarian parties were drifting apart in any case, and were concentrating on internal problems. József Szent-Iványi, under attack for his activist leanings, was replaced as leader of the Hungarian National Party by Andor Jaross.

That was the background to Szüllő’s replacement at the head of the OKSzP by János Esterházy in December 1932, mostly at the urging of Budapest.<sup>34</sup> At Starý Smokovec on December 14, 1932, the new party executive elected 31-year-old Esterházy as chairman, along with two new vice chairmen, János Dobránszky and Tibor Neumann. The first signs were not encouraging: Esterházy’s inexperience, youth and aristocratic title were hard for many people to swallow.<sup>35</sup> Embassy reports show relations between the two parties to have been at a low point in 1932, with almost no chance of improvement.<sup>36</sup> In 1933 and 1934, the new party chairman had his trial by fire when political and police pressure on the national parties became increasingly

30 Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára [Hungarian National Archives] (MOL), Külügyminisztérium – Politikai osztály, Reservált iratok 1918–1944, K 64, 1930–52. res.

31 Ibid.

32 MOL K64, 1930–52. res.

33 MOL K64, 1932–42. res.

34 Andrej Tóth, “Zemská křesťansko-socialistická strana v Československu pod vedením hraběte Jánose Esterházyho v letech 1933–1935,” *Moderní dějiny* 19, no. 1 (2011): 67–103; Gyula Popély, “A kisebbségi magyar pártpolitika megújulása a harmincas évek első felében,” *Regio* 3 (1990): 97–132.

35 Ibid., 1932, 594. res.

36 Ibid., 1932, 660. res.

29 Expression used in: Roman Szporluk, *The Political Thought of Thomas G. Masaryk* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1981); Idem, “Masaryk’s Republic: Nationalism with a Human Face” in *Masaryk in Perspective: Comments and Criticism*, ed. Milíč Čapek et al. (Ann Arbor, Mich.: SVU, 1981), 219–39. On Czechoslovakian ethno-policy, see Peter Haslinger, *Nation und Territorium im tschechischen politischen Diskurs 1880–1938* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2010), 312–15, 294–99, 323–25; Andrej Tóth et al., *Národnostní menšiny*, 208–25.



manifest (temporary closure of the Hungarian opposition newspaper *Prágai Magyar Hírlap* and direct pressure on Esterházy – personal attacks, surveillance and withdrawal of his passport).<sup>37</sup>

Esterházy gradually managed to separate out the basic issues of minority community-building and address them individually. He did, however, communicate to the Czechoslovakian government as a single package the demands of the party, and those emanating from the field of culture and education and the civil sphere. He approached self-organization within the minority community as a provisional aim pending the success of Hungary's revisionist policy, but also clearly perceived its intrinsic importance.

The party memoranda which Esterházy submitted to President Beneš and the Czechoslovakian government, his speeches to parliament and his joint submissions to official discussions on the budget and other affairs (during the years he shared chairmanship of the EMP with Andor János) show that in issues of culture, language, the economy and institution-building, Esterházy attempted to combine traditional grievance-raising activity with a new type of community organization. In the key issues of identity policy, he set out to obtain community self-government rights. He took the clearly discernible view that even from the minority position, it was not permissible to permanently bend to forced historical situations and to subordinate the self-organization of Slovakian and Subcarpathian Hungarians to diplomatic maneuvers of uncertain duration and outcome.

In the second half of the 1930s, the most pressing tasks were to unify minority Hungarian parties, rethink the Hungarian social frameworks in Slovakia, stabilize the system of cultural and education institutions, provide a structured basis of political and financial support from Hungary for the political program and explore the prospects for collaboration with Slovakian autonomists. After the unification of the OKSzP and MNP following the decision of June 21, 1936, parliamentary work became secondary for the minority Hungarian political elite.<sup>38</sup>

37 Andrej Tóth, "Nástup hraběte Jánose Esterházyho do čela maďarské Zemské křesťansko-socialistické strany v Československu na sklonku roku 1932," *Moderní dějiny* 18, no. 1 (2010): 77–101.

38 "The United Party, under favorable psychological and historical conditions, built up Hungarian cultural bodies, internally isolated every attempt at splitting, won over deserters among the peasantry and the workers by clarifying its social principles, and organized youth. It remedied the errors of the reactionaries, endeavored to clarify neglected economic issues and set up an elite, thus making the Hungarians an autonomous entity, and awaited the hour of decision." Pál Szvatkó, *A visszatért magyarok. A felvidéki magyarság húsz éve* (Budapest: Révay, 1938), 110–11.

During the Czechoslovakian crisis of 1938, the center of gravity of political representation of the Hungarian ethnic group shifted to the EMP, led by Esterházy and Jaross. This firstly enabled preparations for revisionist changes to be directed from the center, avoiding hysteria, and secondly withdrew the party's members from the front line of majority-minority conflicts. Finally, with the backing of its political hinterland, the party acted as political intermediary between the Prague and Budapest governments. In this respect, 1935 brought substantial progress in all three of these areas. Contesting the parliamentary elections of May 19 on a joint list, the two Hungarian parties reaped considerable success.<sup>39</sup> The major distinctive features of Hungarian politics in Czechoslovakia in the second half of the 1930s were undoubtedly the unconcealed clashes—developing into irreconcilable confrontation—between activism and political opposition on one side and revision and defense of minority rights on the other.<sup>40</sup>

Esterházy's unqualified refusal of the ministerial post offered to him by President Beneš in 1937 indicates that his aims as chairman of the EMP were not confined to the radical transformation of nationality policy in the Czechoslovak Republic. He was also preparing for revisionist changes. Just as the chances for the realization of Hungarian interests within the framework of Slovakian autonomy were dwindling, he found all the more reason for a political approach harmonized with Hungarian foreign policy. Unlike Szüllő, however, he did not wait for instructions from the Hungarian prime minister's office or foreign ministry, but negotiated their leaders as an equal partner, trying to persuade Budapest of the need to support the measures he was proposing.

Esterházy had definite opinions on a possible alteration of Czechoslovakia and how the Czechoslovakian crisis would develop. He considered as out of the question a request by Beneš, repeated several times after January 1936, for the Hungarian parties, and subsequently the unified EMP, to enter the Czechoslovakian government, citing the failure to meet Hungarian linguistic,

39 The parties on the joint candidates' list polled a total of 254,943 votes, returning nine members of parliament and five senators. Béla Angyal, "A csehszlovákiai magyarság választói magatartása a két világháború között," *Fórum* 3, no. 1 (2001): 3–48.

40 Géza Szüllő eloquently conveyed this contradiction in a report to the Budapest government: "... I do not want to create a satisfied national group out of the Hungarians in Czechoslovakia. My aim is that the Hungarians should not remain in Czechoslovakia and it is not Hungarian politics but the politics of Hungary that I am engaged in in Czechoslovakia." Béla Angyal, ed., *Dokumentumok az Országos Keresztényszocialista Párt történetéhez 1919–1936* (Dunaszerdahely: Lilium Aurum, 2004), 373.

cultural and political demands. But alongside Hungarian cultural and linguistic demands he was determined to put increasing political emphasis on preparing for the autonomous status of the Hungarian minority. He entered into talks in which Czechoslovakian–Hungarian relations were interpreted in the wider international context, but with the proviso that the Czechoslovakian Hungarian question had ultimately to be resolved by intergovernmental and international negotiations. In this respect, the recognition of Hungary’s equal international ranking via the compromise embodied by the Hungarian–Little Entente negotiations in Bled in 1938 would have followed the fundamentally illusory scenario of a Central and Eastern Europe without Germany, and from the outset, every participant was aware of its alternative character.<sup>41</sup>

Right up till September 1938, Esterházy did not commit himself to open support for revision, but it was no secret either to Beneš or Czechoslovakian Prime Minister Milan Hodža that his collaboration with Hungarian governments in the late 1930s was unquestionably subordinated to that aim. For Esterházy, unification with Hungary of the whole of Slovakia and the whole of Subcarpathia would have been the ideal solution, but he admitted the impossibility of that by summer or autumn 1938 at the latest.

Was János Esterházy an irredentist, revisionist politician? It is time to address this question unambiguously, with due respect to the realities of the time. Border revision was a central issue of Central European intergovernmental relations between the two world wars. Neither Czechoslovakia’s founder T. G. Masaryk nor Beneš, who succeeded him, rejected all of the options outright, but naturally they sought to maintain the status quo and thought in terms of mutual agreements. Esterházy regarded revision on the principle of national self-determination as an evidently legitimate aim if it did not involve violence or the curtailment of the rights of the other nation. Esterházy’s revisionism was a synthesis of populist, national, ethnic and historical elements, an idealistic and, in several respects, unrealistic concept. The documents of the Hungarian National Council, set up prior to the First Vienna Award, show that he attempted—admittedly with little success—to integrate the experiences of Czechoslovakian

41 Hungary held talks with the Little Entente countries from 1937 on the observance of minority rights, recognition of Hungary’s equal re-armament rights and the ban on revisionist actions. The Bled convention signed on August 23, 1938 was accepted by representatives of the four countries at the urging of the increasingly isolated Czechoslovakia, but did not come into effect. Magda Ádám, “The Munich Crisis and Hungary: The Fall of the Versailles Settlement in Central Europe,” *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 10, no. 2–3 (1999): 82–121; Thomas Spira, “Hungary and the Little Entente: The Failed Rapprochement of 1937,” *Südost Forschungen* 40 (1981): 144–63.

Hungarian politics during its twenty years of minority status into a revisionist program conceived as a return to Hungary.<sup>42</sup>

Until the closing phase of the Czechoslovakian crisis, starting in August 1938, Esterházy primarily attempted to interpret the Czechoslovakian Hungarian issue in the terms of the Prague–Bratislava–Budapest triangle. Only after the Munich Treaty did he try to become personally involved in international preparations for border revision on terms favorable to the Hungarians, and he held talks to that end in Warsaw and Rome. Nonetheless, the social, cultural and political organization of the Czechoslovakian Hungarian minority and efforts to improve the legal and political status of the Hungarian minority remained at the center of gravity of his activities as party leader.

### *The Ideas and Political Construction of Minority Self-Organization*

In all three countries, by defending the language and national identity of the Hungarian communities and securing citizens’ and minority rights, the ethnic parties succeeded in holding back the deluge of assimilation. Looking from the historical perspective, this in itself was a substantial achievement during the first decade of minority in Romania, and even more so in Yugoslavia.

In the brief period before royal dictatorship in Yugoslavia, the Hungarian minority’s representation in the national and provincial parliaments was very limited, indeed little more than symbolic on the national scale, while the alternative of cooperation with democratic or radical parties constantly divided the Hungarian political elite and the voters. There were occasional attempts at activism with the majority parties and sometimes also with the Romanian and Czechoslovakia governments. At no time during the interwar period, however, was there a substantial popular base for consocial minority politics aimed at collaboration with the majority, owing to the difficulties of reconciliation with Hungarian community interests.

Nonetheless, the first and second generations of the Hungarian minorities in Transylvania, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia—fathers born in the late nineteenth century and the first generation of sons educated in minority schools—developed a political outlook which strove for equal rights within

42 Accordingly, an ideal aim emerged in the EMP’s political program, building on the social integration manifested in party union, of an autonomous Hungarian community which would integrate every section of society and every orientation, and thus have the Hungarian minority represented to a proportion of greater than five percent among both Slovakian politicians and the Prague government.

the framework both of the Hungarian cultural nation and the state community of the country. They emphasized the protection, dissemination and pursuit of regional interests, demanding fair positions for themselves.

This multidimensional minority nation-building was full of failures, partial successes, retardations and restarts throughout the twentieth century. In the constantly changing conditions of Brubaker's "triadic nexus," the minority Hungarian elites usually failed to realize their will when the community was put to the test. Their situation and everyday experiences caused them to pursue pragmatic politics, but they endeavored in vain to underpin their community-organization efforts with realistic, lifelike or compromise-seeking constructions that were also plausible to the titular nations. They were frequently bypassed or ignored when decisions about them were made by the majority elite and the Hungarian government.

The successful ideologies of minority-Hungarian self-interpretation between the two world wars were those which focused on regional aspects: Transylvaniam, various right- and left-wing versions of "minority messianism" in Czechoslovakia, and the conception linked to the Voivodina writer and literary organizer Kornél Szenteleky (1893–1933) and the Subotica journal *Kalangya*, attempting to put regional values and *couleur locale* into the center of Hungarian literary self-interpretation in Yugoslavia. These purely community-building functions, despite their idealism, proved more realistic conceptions in both the short and long term than the theory of peaceful revision which sought to restore the historical Hungarian state with the help of world powers. Although none of these theoretical constructions originating from within a minority could have been capable of transforming majority society's attitudes to that minority, they had an indisputable practical usefulness in organizing minority society and reforming attitudes within Hungarian identity politics.

Only to a very small extent was the self-organization of Hungarian minorities in the interwar period accompanied by integration into the new state communities. Many reasons for this may be identified. At that time, the injustice of control of their towns and countryside passing to another state was felt more keenly by most minority Hungarians than by Hungarian citizens. Following the Treaty of Trianon, ignorance of the majority language, unaccustomed forms of administration, legislation and justice, often discriminatively implemented, and the frequently tense relations between Hungary and the neighboring countries were heavy burdens on the process of adaptation and integration. Each of the "host" states from the outset defined itself as a nation state with a constitution,

political apparatus, administration and legal system which—with the exception of the Czechoslovak Republic—left the minorities very little room for maneuver.

That minority citizens and communities developed little loyalty or identification with the new community of citizenship is not surprising in such circumstances. Even in Czechoslovakia, with its relatively generous nationality policy, the non-Slav minorities were not won over to the idea of the single "Czechoslovak" political nation. What is more, the united action of Slovakian and Carpathian Ruthene "native inhabitants" must for a while have seemed like a realistic counter-alternative against the incoming Czechs. The "native inhabitant" concept in Slovakia, which would have bound together the region's original Hungarian, Slovak, German and Ruthenian inhabitants against the majority Czechs, and the "autonomist" block conceived as its continuation, had little chance of success given the unspoken but irresolvable historical conflicts between Slovaks and Hungarians.<sup>43</sup> The concept even gained the support of the Budapest government and was finally dropped only in the weeks leading up to before the Vienna Award, upon the realization that the Slovaks were not prepared to return to Hungarian dominion under any circumstances. Opposition to the new states also proved to be an important community-forming factor in the early stage, although passive resistance proved to be a source of serious losses for the Hungarian minorities: government employees refusing to take the oath of loyalty to the new state were dismissed, and most of them joined the roughly three hundred thousand refugees who left for Hungary.

The rudimentary regional self-awareness of minority groups, which gradually unfolded in all three countries, represented a higher level of community organization. In Transylvania, the "pacts policy" pursued by the National Hungarian Party, with somewhat modest success, was aimed at laying the social-psychological foundations, given the narrow options of the minority existence, for attaining more effective self-organization in the framework of national unity. In Yugoslavia, after the royal dictatorship imposed in 1929 closed down the Hungarian Party, the journals *Kalangya* and *Híd* attempted to fill the gap by their own means. In all three of the Hungarian minority groups, efforts of representation and legal protection—to a certain extent owing to the restrictions on political activity—had to concentrate considerable energy into building up their own cultural, educational and religious institutions.

43 Attila Simon, *Egy rövid esztendő krónikája. A szlovákiai magyarok 1938-ban* (Somorja: Fórum Kisebbségkutató Intézet, 2010), accessed August 29, 2013, <http://mek.oszk.hu/08900/08988/08988.pdf>

All efforts towards self-organization suffered from difficulties in maintaining links with the kin country, and particularly the Budapest government circles who reserved the right of decision in most major issues. Such links were initially banned and always obstructed. They only became well organized at the highest political level, and were otherwise disorganized and awkward. The relationships between Hungary and the Hungarian minorities have changed many times in the last ninety years. Between the two world wars, the main aim was to defeat the dominant feeling among minority Hungarians of having been cut off and ruined.

The rejection of Trianon and the increasingly radical demands for border changes as formulated in the revisionist public discourse and Hungarian foreign policy and propaganda enjoyed broad support throughout Hungarian society, and was not confined to the political class of reduced Hungary. Among Hungarian minorities, however, radical Hungarian irredentists had a relatively narrow base up to the mid-1930s. The second main group of factors influencing the self-organization of minorities concerned the political, economic and cultural rights provided by the new states and the general attitudes of majority society to the minorities. Here, as in the other areas, no true breakthrough or constitutional solution was reached during the first period of minority, and proposals got no further than the drawing board.

### *Grievance and Community Narratives*

For most Central and Eastern Europe nations, the twentieth century—despite all of the destruction and suffering—brought real progress in terms of national politics: Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Slovenians, Croatians and Romanians experienced restoration or establishment of state independence, if in some cases only partially. By contrast, the breakup of the multiethnic Kingdom of Hungary, which had been reunited in 1867 after long centuries of separation, and the passage of one third of the Hungarian-speaking population into minority status, especially when taken together with being on the losing side in two world wars and going through short-lived and ambiguous revolutions in 1918–1919, 1945 and 1956, have caused Hungarian historians and the Hungarian public to view the twentieth century as on a par with the ruinous period of Ottoman occupation.

By the internal logic of Hungary's twentieth-century self-image, dominated by losses, and conflicts and contradictions of domestic and foreign origin, the

restoration of the independent Hungarian state in 1918, 1945 and 1989 hardly registers in the story. The incongruences of Hungarian national society with Hungarian territory and state authority have proved irreconcilable. Neither the revisionist successes of 1938–1941 nor the ideological internationalism of the post-war one-party state brought any solution. Short-lived tolerance and positive minority policies by one or two neighboring nation states and the sluggish development of Hungarian national-cultural institutions have only sketched out the potential for progress. The effect of policies on integration, good neighborliness and minorities in the quarter of a century since the 1990 political transition has been similar.<sup>44</sup>

The history of Hungarian minorities in the “short twentieth century of the nation states” has three readings or patterns. The grievance discourse, which appears in most analyses and depictions in every age, rests on the prolific experience of grievances arising from rights and property deprivations, continuous demographic decrease and individual stories of suffering, with the appropriate heroic or negativist orchestration. At its extreme, it has produced individuals and groups at various periods of minority history who have stressed the absurdity and unlivability of the minority existence.<sup>45</sup>

An authoritative section of minority intellectuals in the consolidation period of the interwar period, however, urged their fellows to set aside the grievance approach and come to terms with legal inequality. Instead, they encouraged the minority Hungarians to self-organize, participate in political and public life and take a formative role in their own history. From the outset, their approach was dominated by an interpretation concentrating on the successes of community-building, active legal defense and interethnic communication. As a way of dealing with restriction of rights and majority pressure for assimilation, this discourse

44 In this respect, one of the first single-author histories of Hungary to be written in the twentieth century comes to similar conclusions as the last. Both authors stress the need for a realistic historical self-image free of ethnocentric illusions and taking proper heed of the nation states as they have formed in the region. Gyula Szekfű, *Három nemzeték, és ami utána következik* (Budapest: ÁKV–Maecenas, 1989), 388–95 and Ignác Romsics, *Magyarország története a XX. században* (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 1999), 518.

45 Authors far from each other in style and looking from completely different viewpoints have come round to a rejection of the minority paradigm. Among the most influential writers are Sándor Makkai, “Nem lehet,” *Lábatár* 5, no. 2 (1937): 49–53. On Makkai's writing after he renounced his episcopacy and moved to Hungary and the debates it set off, see Péter Cseke et al., ed., *Nem lehet. A kisebbségi sors vitája* (n.p.: Héttorony Könyvkiadó, 1989). Lajos Jócsik, born in Nové Zámky, and of left-wing orientation, identified the lack of institutions for a full life as the most serious deficiency of the minority life. Lajos Jócsik, *Iskola a magyarságra. Egy nemzeték élete húsz éves kisebbségben* (Budapest: Nyugat, 1939), 65.

looked to survival and the ethos of the quality of Hungarianness, and to the measurable achievements of transmission and self-organization.

It was an approach which placed more importance on down-to-earth everyday achievements than grievances and national narratives rooted in past greatness and symbolic victories. The most realistic reading combined these two approaches, treating the minority existence as a process of permanent adaptation. It saw demographic decrease, emigration, isolation, language deprivation, language loss and violation of rights as mobilizing factors which kept the self-organization of minority communities on permanent alert. The diverse formations of bi- and multilingualism, double and multiple identity meant protection against pressure applied by the majority and competence in adapting to circumstances.

What these and other related interpretations had in common was a concept of minority Hungarian communities couched in terms of a forced community in a non-dominant numerical, economic and political position in the country. The primary duties of this community were to preserve and regenerate its own linguistic and cultural heritage and identity, to maintain religious, educational and cultural institutions, and to continuously cooperate with the other parts of Hungarian national society without obstruction. This was a self-interpretation that fundamentally originated among minority intellectuals. It enabled them to identify, in terms of the obstacles, tasks and successes of national community-building, the experiences and situation of the minority population in areas of life less obviously distinguishable than language and culture, and present these to members of the majority nation. All three Little Entente countries signed a treaty on the protection of minorities. This had some positive consequences in Czechoslovakia and to a certain extent in Romania, above all in the granting of language-use rights, the retention of a reduced system of Hungarian cultural and educational institutions and the consolidation of the legal position of minority churches. Czechoslovakia endeavored to incorporate the principles of the minorities treaty into its nationalities legislation, but Romania and Yugoslavia tended in the opposite direction, trying to restrict the scope of these principles. This difference showed up most strikingly in the operational freedom and productiveness of Hungarian minority parties. The partial success of Hungarian political representation in Czechoslovakia in the thirties was partly due to concessions which were granted on a larger scale in Masaryk's republic than any other Little Entente country, as the three and a half million strong German minority, orchestrated by Hitler, caused Prague increasing troubles.

All three Hungarian minorities endeavored to make the most of the opportunities provided by the League of Nations' minorities protection system. Interestingly, it was submissions by the Romanian Hungarians that came off best in this area, several times forcing the Bucharest government to retreat on anti-minority measures. This channel was important in redressing grievances concerning all three successor countries' agrarian reforms and related land redistribution, and the state supervision of Hungarian-language schools.<sup>46</sup>

The basic conditions usually identified for Hungarian self-organization were economic-business life organized on ethnic lines, ethnically-oriented school education, and a working press and cultural life. The comprehensive grant of minority rights was regarded as a priority by Budapest governments from the outset. Although Budapest never gave up hope of shifting the borders in the interwar period, it tried to persuade all three neighboring countries with substantial Hungarian minorities to sign bilateral minority protection treaties. Thereafter, it was mostly through League of Nations minorities protection and interparliamentary union and other international legal forums that Hungarian government policy stood up for the Hungarian minorities, all the while admitting that it saw the true solution of the matter as the alteration of the borders.<sup>47</sup>

### *Revisionist Vision and Reality*

Hungary unceasingly kept alive its ideal of border revision, but for a long time found only an indirect echo among minority Hungarian groups. Belief in the prospect of great-power decisions delivering border adjustments would in any case have implied passively waiting for a miracle. Such changes were of course a constant subject of private and family conversations, but everyday actions tended to take their cue from the challenges of adaptation. In other respects, all three large minority communities were constantly aware of Hungary's role as "kin country" or active protector. Although the departure for Hungary by tens of thousands of people lacking citizenship or settlement permits, the relaxation of procedures for bringing in newspapers and books, and the spread of radio

46 On minority protection see Artúr Balogh, *Jogállam és kisebbség*, ed. Ernő Fábrián (Bucharest–Koložsvár: Kriterion, 1997); Zoltán Baranyai, *A kisebbségi jogok védelmének kézikönyve* (Berlin: Voggenreiter, 1925); Lajos Nagy, *A kisebbségek alkotmányjogi helyzete Nagyromániában* (Reprint: Székelyudvarhely: Haáz Rezső Kulturális Egyesület, 1994 [Koložsvár, 1944]); Erzsébet Szalayné Sándor, *A kisebbségvédelem nemzetközi jogi intézményrendszere a 20. században* (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadói Kör, 2003)

47 Magda Ádám, "A kisantant és a magyar kisebbségi kérdés," *História* 13, no. 2–3 (1991): 26–28.

reception in the 1930s all had the effect of increasing the awareness of revisionist ideas among minority Hungarian societies, it was only in the late 1930s that people began to follow political developments surrounding the question and appreciate the impending prospect of border adjustments.<sup>48</sup>

Minority Hungarians were much less moved than the public within Hungary by integrationist ideas, ethnic revision scenarios, vociferous Hungarian government propaganda for internal consumption (tempered for outward purposes), obstacles to obtaining great-power support for peaceful border corrections, and contradictions between desire and reality.<sup>49</sup>

The Vienna Awards of 1938 and 1941, despite the brief euphoria of the “re-annexations” and “territorial expansion,” engendered an almost immediate sobering-up among the “returned Hungarians,” who perceived the unrealism of the “Everything back” slogan, the extreme dangers of the conflicts which revisionist foreign policy had stoked up, and not least the divergences of interest between them and the kin country.<sup>50</sup> Even the suicide of Prime Minister Pál Teleki in 1941 failed to awaken the Hungarian elite to the ruinous connection between revisionist logic and the fate of a country descending into the horrors of war. Hungary continued to drift. Having hoped for national reunion, the country instead found itself confronting every one of its neighbors and indeed—through its commitment to the war—the rest of the world minus the Axis powers. Every problem of the peace treaty showed up in the development of the Hungarian minorities between the wars. Trianon did not only grant self-determination to Hungary’s former non-Hungarian nationalities, it implemented the strategic and economic aims of the victorious great powers and the alliances of small Central and Eastern European nations. In consequence, Hungary, like Germany, found itself plying a fatal course, and despite every effort of foreign policy and all the military calculations and apparent caution, the revision of the peace treaty

and the territorial gains permitted by Germany between 1938 and 1941 swept the country and the Hungarian people into another global conflict. The great-power settlement following the Second World War attempted to create a lasting peace by eliminating the possibility of minority and border-revision conflicts. Its limited success, and the risks it implied for further regional conflicts, were pointed out by István Bibó as early as 1946.<sup>51</sup>

### *Epilogue: the Place of Minorities in the Hungarian Nation Concept*

The interpretation of the facts and tendencies of separate minority development is a constant subject of debate in the description of twentieth-century Hungarian–Hungarian relations. There is a question which has arisen in literary scholarship from time to time ever since the 1920s: is there such a thing as Transylvanian or Slovakian minority literature? The first approaches to the social history of minorities concentrated on regional, interethnic and multicultural aspects, indicating that community-building among minorities could benefit from new identity and loyalty strategies based on regional differences carried over from the time before they were cut off by new frontiers and given new citizenship.

The experience of political, cultural, legal, financial and linguistic changes following the constitutional changes of 1918–1920 were formative on the first minority generation. After much of the old Hungarian middle class left for Hungary, minority Hungarian societies were left to their own devices. Gábor Kemény, born in Kassa (now Košice, Slovakia) identified the intellectual essence of community organization among the Hungarian minority in Czechoslovakia (“the motivation for intellectual development in the detached lands”) as the emergence of a “minority mentality,” the spirit of a community facing permanent threats and thus forming a special sense of reality. The minority community way

48 László Szarka, “Artificial Communities and an Unprotected Protective Power: The Trianon Peace Treaty and the Minorities,” in *Hungary and the Hungarian minorities (Trends in the Past and in Our Time)*, ed. idem (Boulder, Colo.–Highland Lakes, N.J.: Atlantic Research and Publications, Inc., 2004), 14–35.

49 Zeidler, *A revíziós gondolat*, 157–76.

50 In a contemporary report, Márai related his experiences of the first conflicts of Hungarians “returned” from Czechoslovakia with the motherland. “What should we feel, we who have returned, and in the corner of our eye the tears of joy at reunion has still not dried, and what the rest feel, who are still on the other side of the borders, when the hate-orchestra tunes up, when people who yesterday were still working together for the Hungarians now stand in the whistling chorus of a savage political and press war, when absolutely loyal and honourable Hungarians, from one day to the next, are drowning in the seaweed of hate.” Sándor Márai, *Ajándék a végzettől. A Felvidék és Erdély visszacsatolása* (Budapest: Helikon Kiadó, 2004), 152.

51 “...whereas Hungary cannot even look forward to gaining ethnic borders, the entire historic area of Bohemia, with international assistance, is being cleared of minorities, and Poland is being similarly compensated for its lost historic territory with land freed of minorities. Thus in Hungary we can expect a severe psychological crisis affecting the future of democracy, while Poland and Czechoslovakia may figure in a large-scale European crisis of conscience concerning mass resettlement.” István Bibó, “A kelet-európai kisállamok nyomorúsága,” in idem, *Válogatott tanulmányok*, vol. 2, 1945–1949 (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1986), 185–265, accessed August 29, 2013, <http://mek.niif.hu/02000/02043/html/206.html#216>. See also Bernard Crick, “Introduction to István Bibó,” *Hungarian Review* 2, no. 6 (2011), reprinted from István Bibó, *The Paralysis of International Institutions and the Remedies* (London: The Harvester Press, 1976) [http://www.hungarianreview.com/article/introduction\\_to\\_istvan\\_bibo](http://www.hungarianreview.com/article/introduction_to_istvan_bibo).

of life was the basis of a “new social concept” which “made the life of the detached Hungarian masses more human and more European.”<sup>52</sup>

Minority communities attempted to counterbalance their abandoned, peripheral status by mobilizing their own past, turning to older regional—and sometimes central—Transylvanian, Upper Hungarian and southern Hungarian traditions. Thus the mentality of the Czechoslovakian Hungarians gradually turned them into “the most Westernized Hungarian outpost,” and every Hungarian self-organization acquired auxiliary justification via the buoyant regionalism of Transylvanism and *couleur locale*.

For the Hungarians in Slovakia, the boldest, most autonomous phenomenon of the first twenty-year period of minority was the left-wing Sarló movement launched by the Hungarian poet Dezső Győri (1900–1974). This proclaimed “the new face of Hungarianness,” and depicted the minority life as a school of progress; it was the most audacious assertion of the break from the old Hungarian world. Ultimately absorbed into the Communist Party, Sarló’s “finest chapter started when it disappeared as a movement.”<sup>53</sup>

Although no theoretical constructions were capable, from a minority position, of transforming majority society’s attitudes to the minority, they had an indisputable practical usefulness in organizing minority society and reforming positions in Hungarian identity politics. Progressive circles in Hungary, despite their ambivalence, constantly kept track of the value created by the minority Hungarian generations, and in number of cases gave it due credit. The outcome of Zsigmond Móricz’s tour of the Hungarian-inhabited areas of Czechoslovakia and Sándor Márai’s laudatory comments following the First Vienna Award show that they were always aware of the significance of minority community-building during the Horthy era. Márai explained this minority “added value” in terms of the social openness of the second minority generation, with their more urban way of life.<sup>54</sup>

52 Gábor Kemény, *Így tűnt el egy gondolat. A felvidéki magyar irodalom története 1918–1938* (Budapest: MEFHOSZ, 1941), 12–13.

53 Pál Szvatkó, *Visszatért magyarok*, 180–89. On the Sarló Movement see Deborah S. Cornelius, *In Search of the Nation: The New Generation of Hungarian Youth in Czechoslovakia 1925–1934* (Boulder, Colo.: East European Monographs, 1998).

54 “In recent decades, young Hungarians born in Upper Hungary have been at the forefront of intellectual and social movements in Hungary. The Upper Hungarian soul is above all a social soul. The man of Upper Hungary is a town-dweller, a town-builder, and lives in an intellectually more direct and practical milieu than the people of the *puszta*.” Márai, *Ajándék a végzettől*, 88.

Similarly, the minorities’ “bridge role” was not in itself illusory or a dead end, but became so because the majority side viewed it as the role of the interpreter, and with the exception of a few celebratory moments did not take up the offer of mediation. The rallying of progressive elements in the majority and minority populations and of the intellectual elites of the Danube lands, was one of the more utopian ideals circulating in the Hungarian left wing. It serves as a model of role confusion and false assessment of the minorities’ position, a conceptual search for alternatives to the capitalist and Communist *cul-de-sacs* which was itself a *cul-de-sac*, a confusion of the theoretical and practical dimensions.

The critical period for all three of the Hungarian groups discussed here was the decade of the 1930s, when the lessons of minority existence became apparent, the overoptimism of the “minority mission” and the sterile hope for a revisionist miracle were abandoned, and the activism of government parties petered out.<sup>55</sup> Progressive circles and the intellectual elite in Hungary in both the first and second halves of the twentieth century were constantly aware of the rapidly changing contexts and core issues of social, economic and identity politics among the Hungarian minorities. Nonetheless, even those writers and thinkers in Hungary who were open to the minority question allowed their analyses and intellectual efforts to be dominated by the dilemmas of domestic policy on social, interior and foreign affairs. These always forced attention away from the issues that could have brought real and rapid remedies to the problems of minority communities. And there was even one writer on public affairs from Transylvania who saw the social burden of the three million poor peasants in Hungary as a Hungarian national issue of greater weight than the cause of the three million minority Hungarians.<sup>56</sup>

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55 Ibid., 141.

56 “That a three million-strong Hungarian minority has been wrenched from the unity of the national soul is a serious problem, but much more serious is the question of how the three million village proletarians of pure Hungarian blood in Hungary can be taken into the body of the nation, and how they can be kept within its unity.” Dezső László, *A kisebbségi élet*, 196.

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