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THE QUESTION OF TERRITORIAL PLEBISCITES AFTER THE FIRST WORLD WAR WITH SPECIAL REGARD TO HUNGARY

1 Introduction

“No peace can last, or ought to last, which does not recognize and accept the principle that governments derive all their just powers from the consent of the governed, and that no right anywhere exists to hand peoples about from sovereignty to sovereignty as if they were property.”¹

President Woodrow Wilson’s often-cited address of 22 January 1917 to the Senate on the terms of peace in Europe is mostly seen as his first important commitment to the principle of self-determination. Defeated nations repeatedly referred to this idea after the First World War as they hoped to avoid considerable losses of their territory if the principle professed by the president of the most powerful victorious great power were also respected in the peace negotiations. Wilson’s statement was an expression of the old American tradition on the requirement of the “consent of the governed”,² which had already been formulated in the

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¹ And later on: “[...] I am proposing, as it were, that the nations should with one accord adopt the doctrine of President Monroe as the doctrine of the world: that no nation should seek to extend its polity over any other nation or people, but that every people should be left free to determine its own polity, its own way of development, unhindered, unthreatened, unafraid, the little along with the great and powerful. [...]” Cited after DiNunzio, Mario R. (ed.): *Woodrow Wilson: Essential Writings and Speeches of the Scholar-President*. New York – London: New York University Press. 2006, 394, 396.

² Thüerer, Gerhard: *Das Selbstbestimmungsrecht der Völker mit einem Exkurs zur Jurafrage*. Bern: Stämpfli & Cie AG. 1976, 15, 27-28.

Declaration of Independence of 4 July 1776,³ and it was followed by other similar proclamations in 1917 and 1918.⁴ Leading politicians of the Allied Powers declared similar principles before the end of the

³ “[...] We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute a new Government, laying its Foundation on such Principles and organizing its Powers in such Form, as to Them shall seem most likely to affect their Safety and Happiness. [...]” Cited after Jayne, Allen: *Jefferson's Declaration of Independence: Origins, Philosophy, and Theology*. Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky. 1998, 175.

⁴ Address to the Congress on 2 April 1917: “[...] We are glad, now that we see the facts with no veil of false pretense about them, to fight thus for the ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its peoples, the German peoples included: for the rights of nations great and small and the privilege of men everywhere to choose their way of life and of obedience. The world must be made safe for democracy. Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty. We must have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion. [...]” Hart, Albert Bushnell (ed.): *Selected Addresses and Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson*. Honolulu, Hawaii: University Press of the Pacific. 2002, 195. Address to the Congress on 11 February 1918: “[...] First, that each part of the final settlement must be based upon the essential justice of that particular case and upon such adjustments as are most likely to bring a peace that will be permanent; second, that peoples and provinces are not to be bartered about from sovereignty to sovereignty as if they were chattels and pawns in the game, even the great game, now forever discredited, of the balance of power; but that third, every territorial settlement involved in this war must be made in the interest and for the benefit of the populations concerned, and not as a part of any mere adjustment or compromise of claims amongst rival states; and fourth, that all well-defined national aspirations shall be accorded the utmost satisfaction that can be accorded them without introducing new or perpetuating old elements of discord and antagonism. [...]” Cited after Lansing, Robert: *The Peace Negotiations*. Fairfield, IA: 1st World Library - Literary Society. 2004, 317-318. Wilson's address at Mount Vernon on 4 July 1918: “[...] The settlement of every question, whether of territory, of sovereignty, of economic arrangement, or of political relationship, upon the basis of the free acceptance of that settlement by the people immediately concerned, and not upon the basis of the material interest or advantage of any other nation or people which may desire a different settlement for the sake of its own exterior influence or mastery. [...]” (also known as 2nd point of Wilson's “Four Points”) cited after Wilson, Woodrow: *Address of President Wilson Delivered at Mount Vernon, July 4, 1918*. Washington. 1918, 4-5. (archive.org) Also cited by Mattern, Johannes: *The Employment of the Plebiscite in the Determination of Sovereignty*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press. 1921, 176-177.

world war⁵ and the European general public was not far from taking for granted that the post-war settlement would be based on basically different doctrines than most treaties of the 19th century signed by the great powers after conflicts of war. Wilson's statements largely contributed to the growing expectations of different nations outside Europe as well, which hoped to be freed from their colonial powers and felt encouraged to launch movements and uprisings to this end.⁶

These utterances, however, even if they became more precise in the course of time, left much room for interpretation. It was not clear what "self-determination", the right of the people to freely "determine their own polity" mean: independence or autonomy. The word "people" could stand both for "state", "nation" and a "part of the nation"; it was also questionable who should be entitled to decide on questions of "self-determination".⁷ Plebiscites emerged as one possible answer: direct popular votes of people concerned in the territories, the status of which gave rise to much controversy. Historical examples to this kind of solution can be traced back as early as the Middle Ages.⁸ In modern times, territorial plebiscites were practiced during the French Revolution, then in the course of the Italian unification process, but the frequency of such popular votes markedly decreased in the late 19th century,⁹ and neither the practice of territorial changes nor the doctrine of public international law was based on the idea that changes of sovereignty should necessarily be preceded by the expression of the consent of people concerned.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the idea was present and first officially formulated in a decree of peace by the meeting of the All-Russian Convention of

⁵ Mattern 1921, *op. cit.* 177-178.

⁶ See e.g. on Egypt, India, China and Korea: Manela, Erez: *The Wilsonian Moment. Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2007.

⁷ Thürer 1976, *op. cit.* 28.

⁸ Mattern 1921, *op. cit.* 28-53.

⁹ Wambaugh, Sarah: *Plebiscites since the World War. With a Collection of Official Documents*. Vol. I. Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 1933, 3.

¹⁰ Mattern 1921, *op. cit.* 181-182.

Soviets of Workers', Soldiers', and Peasants' Deputies on 8 November 1917, when this assembly proposed to all belligerent parties to start peace negotiations and demanded an "immediate peace without annexations (i.e., without seizure of foreign territory, without the forcible annexation of foreign nationalities) and without indemnities". By annexation of foreign territory was meant "any addition to a large or powerful State of a small or weak nationality, without definitely, clearly, and voluntarily expressed consent and desire of this nationality". It was also laid down that no nation should be "retained within the frontiers of a certain State by force" and that the status of such nations should be decided by "free voting", by means of plebiscite which should "take place under the condition of the complete removal of the armies of the annexing or the more powerful nation".¹¹ In June 1919, so after the end of the world war, the Allied Powers, although they did not mention explicitly the term "plebiscite", clearly declared themselves again for following Wilson's ideas on national self-determination in post-war settlement and the German Government announced as early as in October 1918 that it accepted the same principles.¹²

2 Plebiscites According to the Peace Treaties

The peace treaties, however, finally did not fulfil the expectations regarding plebiscites. The Treaty of Versailles of June 1919 provided only for five popular votes: three regarding territories on the German-

¹¹ "If any nation whatsoever is retained within the frontiers of a certain State by force, if it is not given the right of free voting in accordance with its desire, regardless of the fact whether such desire was expressed in the press, in people's assemblies, in decisions of political parties, or rebellions and insurrections against national oppression, such plebiscite to take place under the condition of the complete removal of the armies of the annexing or the more powerful nation; if the weaker nation is not given the opportunity to decide the question of the forms of its national existence, then its adjoining is an annexation, that is, seizure - violence". Cumming, Caroline King - Pettit, Walter William (eds): *Russian-American Relations, March, 1917 - March, 1920. Documents and Papers*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe. 1920, 41-42. Also referred to by Wambaugh 1933, *op. cit.* 6.

¹² Wambaugh 1933, *op. cit.* 12.

Polish border, one for the border between Germany and Denmark and one for the Saar Basin between Germany and France. In addition to them, “unilateral consultations” were held concerning the German-Belgian border, too, in the districts of Eupen and Malmédy. The Treaty of Saint-Germain between the Allies and the Republic of German-Austria of September 1919 envisaged only one plebiscite in Carinthia.

As for the German-Danish border, two zones of North Schleswig, which had been debated between Denmark and Prussia since 1848, were subject to referendum at the request of Denmark. These territories were detached from Denmark in the Second Schleswig War in 1864 and put under joint control of Prussia and Austria. The Austro-Prussian War of 1866, however, put an end to the common administration and the Peace of Prague in 1866 provided for a plebiscite to be held within six years on the status of North Schleswig. Nevertheless, Prussia did not perform its duty to organise the vote. The request of Denmark after the First World War can be regarded as a result of these preceding events. The votes were held in February and March 1920, and, based on their outcome, the Northern zone became a part of Denmark, the Southern zone remained a part of Germany.¹³

As regards the German-Polish border, the territorial Commission of Polish Affairs proposed that a “Polish corridor” be established to the Baltic Sea. According to this, West Prussia, the city of Danzig, the greater part of Poznań and Upper Silesia should have been attached to Poland and East Prussia would have been disconnected from the main territory of Germany. The Commission only suggested a plebiscite to be held in the district Allenstein, a territory in East Prussia populated by people of Slavic origin but – as for their religious affiliation – Protestants. Finally, at the proposal of Lloyd George, who feared that Germany would otherwise refuse to sign the peace treaty, Danzig was made a semi-autonomous city-state, and, in addition to Allenstein, the neighbouring territory, Marienwerder was also subject to plebiscite. It was also Lloyd

¹³ Wambaugh 1933, *op. cit.* 15-16, 46-98.; see further Heuer, Jürgen: *Zur politischen, sozialen und ökonomischen Problematik der Volksabstimmungen in Schleswig 1920*. [Beiträge zur Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte, Vol. 5] Kiel: Kommissionsverlag Walter G. Mühlau. 1973.

George who requested a plebiscite about Upper Silesia, an ethnically mixed territory, being, by national feelings and economic reasons, of major importance both for Germany and Poland. Finally, in July 1920, the overwhelming majority of its inhabitants voted for Germany both in Allenstein and Marienwerder and in March 1921, in Upper Silesia approximately 60% of the voters opted for Germany and 40% for Poland. In this case, however, the ethnic borders were clearly outlined by the results and the border was drawn in compliance with them.¹⁴

The Saar Basin was, pursuant to the secret agreement of the Allied Powers of February 1917, to be attached to France, however, President Wilson opposed this plan. Therefore, Georges Clemenceau proposed a transitional period of 15 years under the control of the League of Nations and a subsequent referendum to be held on the future of the territory. In 1933, nearly 91% of the voters decided to return to Germany.¹⁵

The cities of Eupen and Malmédy were attached to Prussia by the Congress of Vienna in 1815 but after the First World War the Belgian delegates established a claim to these territories. To this end, “public expressions of opinions” were carried out in the following manner: Germany had to surrender the territories to Belgium and the inhabitants who intended to remain a part of Germany could sign a register within a period of six months. Finally, this kind of consultation – which cannot be considered to be an uninfluenced declaration of will on behalf of the affected population¹⁶ – resulted in a majority for Belgium in July 1920.¹⁷

¹⁴ Wambaugh 1933, *op. cit.* 16-17, 99-141.; see further Eichner, Karsten: *Briten, Franzosen und Italiener in Oberschlesien 1920-1922. Die Interalliierte Regierungs- und Plebiszitkommission im Spiegel der britischen Akten.* [Beihefte zum Jahrbuch der Schlesischen Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Breslau, ed. by Josef Joachim Menzel, issue XIII.] St. Katharinen: Scripta Mercaturae Verlag, 2002.

¹⁵ Wambaugh 1933, *op. cit.* 411-441.; Münch, Fritz: Saar Territory. In: Bernhard, Rudolf (ed.): *Encyclopedia of Public International Law*, vol. IV, 1. Amsterdam: North-Holland. 2000, 271-273. For a more detailed analysis see Zenner, Maria: *Parteien und Politik im Saargebiet unter dem Völkerbundsregime 1920-1935.* Saarbrücken: Minerva-Verlag Thinner & Nolte. 1966.

¹⁶ Held, Hermann J.: Der Friedensvertrag von Versailles in den Jahren 1919-1923. In: *Jahrbuch des öffentlichen Rechts der Gegenwart*, 12. 1923/24, 320.

¹⁷ Wambaugh 1933, *op. cit.* 18-19, 518-538.

As for the border between Austria and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, the Treaty of Saint-Germain provided for a plebiscite in the Klagenfurt Basin in Carinthia, in a territory having, as regards its ethnicity and language, a mixed population (German- and Slovene-speaking inhabitants) but being geographically and economically an integral part of Austria. As the Commission of Yugoslav Affairs could not reach a common position, the Supreme Council concluded to organise a referendum. According to this, the territory was divided into a Northern and a Southern zone. A popular vote had to be held first in the Southern part of the region and it would have come to a plebiscite in the Northern part only if the majority had opted for Yugoslavia. Finally, in October 1920, nearly 60% of the votes in the Southern zone was cast for Austria, thus, a second referendum was not organised in the Northern zone; the territory remained a part of Austria.¹⁸

During the peace negotiations, plebiscites were proposed or demanded on other territories, as well. As for Alsace-Lorraine – a territory annexed by Prussia in 1871 – liberal and left-wing circles had been urging on a referendum for decades, the French government, however, refused the idea referring to the emigration of French and the settlement of German population since the German conquest, thus – as alleged – a plebiscite would only have legitimized the “bad action” of 1871. Finally, the territory returned to France.¹⁹

Austria requested plebiscites on all territories the Allied Powers intended to detach from it, like South-Tyrol, the German parts of Bohemia and Moravia, Austrian Silesia, Styria and Carniola but these repeated claims fell on deaf ears. The Duchy of Teschen and the neighbouring areas of Spisz and Orava – previously parts of Austria-Hungary – were highly debated between Poland and Czechoslovakia. Thus, the Supreme Council concluded to resolve the matter by referendum, however, it finally gave up this plan. For Eastern Galicia,

¹⁸ Wambaugh 1933, *op. cit.* 24-25, 42, 163-205. For a more detailed analysis see: Valentin, Hellwig – Haiden, Susanne – Maier, Barbara (eds): *Die Kärntner Volksabstimmung 1920 und die Geschichtsforschung. Leistungen, Defizite, Perspektiven.* Klagenfurt: Verlag Johannes Heyn. 2001.

¹⁹ Wambaugh 1933, *op. cit.* 17-18.

which provoked armed conflicts between Poland and Ukraine, the Peace Conference envisaged a plebiscite to be held after a transitional period of 25 years under Polish administration, but Poland raised objections and, as a result, the Supreme Council abandoned the idea. The endeavour of the League of Nations to organise a popular vote on the status of the city of Vilna and the surrounding areas which were arrogated both by Poland and Lithuania failed, too. Italy and Yugoslavia disputed about Eastern Istria, Fiume and Dalmatia. Lloyd George and Wilson favoured a plebiscite but Italy refused it and finally, Istria became a part of Italy, Dalmatia was split and Fiume was granted the status of a "Free State" (the latter was seized by Italy in 1924). As Sarah Wambaugh points it out: even if the Paris peace treaties gave much more attention to the principle of self-determination than former treaties, the Allied Powers avoided plebiscites in every important area, except for Upper Silesia, and in the few cases they opted for it, this was mostly a compromise for escaping from a dilemma.²⁰

The plebiscites held according to the peace treaties can be classified based on differences in their antecedents. Some of them were preceded by violence, others not. In Carinthia, for example, the State (and from 1 December 1918: the Kingdom) of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs tried to establish a *fait accompli* by marching into the country three times between December 1918 and June 1919. (A fourth, unsuccessful attempt was made after the plebiscite.) Casualties amounted to 266 on the Carinthian side and to 154 on the Yugoslav side.²¹ In Upper Silesia Polish separatists had sparked two uprisings before the vote took place and one more after the plebiscite, in the hope that they could attach the territory to Poland. According to a moderate estimate, the number of violent deaths amounted to 2,859 in the period between the German Revolution in November 1918 and the end of the Allied regime in July 1922, in which the three uprisings accounted for the great majority of

²⁰ Wambaugh 1933, *op. cit.* 23-24, 26-28, 31-34, 42.

²¹ Fräss-Ehrfeld, Claudia: *Geschichte Kärntens*, vol. 3, issue 2: *Kärnten 1918-1920. Abwehrkampf – Volksabstimmung, Identitätssuche*. Klagenfurt: Johannes Heyn. 2000, 156.

casualties.²² In case of North Schleswig, no violent events occurred around the plebiscite.

It is also important to note that the initiative for a popular vote did not always come from the defeated party which in this way tried to keep a territory that was planned to be detached by the victorious powers. The plebiscite about North Schleswig was, for example, required by the neutral Denmark, with reference to the Peace Treaty of Prague in 1866 that had already obliged Prussia to organise a vote, but which plebiscite was not held. In case of Allenstein, Marienwerder and Upper Silesia, the request for a plebiscite was made by the British peace delegation and Lloyd George, respectively, in order to prevent unnecessary conflicts with Germany²³ and to make sure that the future of these regions would be decided according to the will of their inhabitants. The idea of plebiscites was opposed by the Polish side.²⁴ The Klagenfurt Basin, similarly, was submitted to plebiscite against the wishes of Yugoslavia, not simply because Austria demanded a vote on all German-speaking territories that were planned to be detached from it but because the Commission on Yugoslav Affairs realized that the majority of the inhabitants of Carinthia – both Austrians and Slovenes – was not in favour of dividing their territory. Thus, it seemed reasonable to ask them instead of simply attaching the Klagenfurt Basin to Yugoslavia.²⁵ Maybe, as a general tendency, it can be laid down that victorious powers did not require a plebiscite over a territory which they hoped to acquire due to their victory (the status quo post bellum, their alleged ethnic majority or oppressed status before the war).

²² Wilson, Tim: *Fatal Violence in Upper Silesia, 1918-1922*. In: Bjork, James et al. (eds): *Creating Nationality in Central Europe, 1880-1950. Modernity, Violence and (Be) longing in Upper Silesia*. New York: Routledge. 2016, 72. Others think that the „Third Silesian Uprising“ alone has cost nearly 4,000 lives in May 1921, see: Karch, Brendan: *Nation and Loyalty in a German-Polish Borderland. Upper Silesia, 1848-1960*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2018, 142.

²³ MacMillan, Margaret: *Paris 1919: Six Months that Changed the World*. New York: Random House. 2002, 220.

²⁴ Wambaugh 1933, *op. cit.* 215.

²⁵ Wambaugh 1933, *op. cit.* 173-177.

3 The Question of Plebiscites during the Peace Negotiations with Hungary

As regards the question of Hungary, the outcome of the post-war settlement cannot be understood without taking into consideration the antecedents. The Kingdom of Austria-Hungary, as it was laid down in the Compromise of 1867, was based on the union of the two countries under a common monarch and connected by some common matters: the foreign, military and financial affairs which were administered by common ministers. Other fields of public life were governed by separate parliaments and governments in Vienna and Budapest. Nevertheless, the society of the dual monarchy, which amounted to 51 million inhabitants, included several nationalities; 12 million German-speaking people (24%) and 10 million Hungarians (20%), who did not even represent a half of the total population. In addition, Czechs (13%), Poles (10%), Transcarpathian Ukrainians (8%), Romanians (6,5%), Croats (5%), Serbs (3-4%), Slovaks (4%), Slovenes (2,5%) and Italians (1,6%) were present as ethnic nationalities, whereas Bosnians and Jews were considered religious minorities.²⁶ These groups – except for Croats who had formed an autonomous part of Hungary since 1868 – were not granted a constitutional status under the Austro-Hungarian Compromise. In Hungary, according to statistical figures of 1910, ethnic Hungarians amounted only to 54,4% of the population. Romanians (16,1%), Slovaks (10,7%), Germans (10,4%), Transcarpathian Ukrainians (2,5%) and Serbs (2,5%)²⁷ were considered as members of the indivisible unitary Hungarian political nation which granted equal rights to all its members. Although their right to use their mother tongue in local administration was guaranteed²⁸ and the law also provided for public elementary and secondary education in their native language, the cultural policy of the late 19th and early 20th century tended to

²⁶ Romsics Ignác: *A Trianoni Békeszerződés*. (3rd, enlarged edition.) Budapest: Osiris. 2007, 9-10.

²⁷ Romsics Ignác: *Hungary in the Twentieth Century*. Budapest: Corvina – Osiris. 1999, 39.

²⁸ Act XLIV of 1868 on equal rights of nationalities.

make ethnic minorities assimilate. These efforts on the one hand, and the attraction of the newly-established Romanian and Serbian nation-states on the other hand gave most ethnic minorities a boost to aspirations for the federalization of the monarchy, the establishment of territorial autonomies and also gave rise to separatist movements. Such desires, however, were rejected by the Hungarian political elite and the attempts of the government on the eve of the world war to take the edge of nationalist progress were not crowned with success.²⁹ The advance of Serbian, Romanian and Czech military forces in the Southern, Eastern and Northern part of the country at the end of 1918 encouraged ethnic minorities to set up different representative bodies, proclaim their independence and make declarations on the accession to the neighbouring nation-states and hereby creating a *fait accompli* before the peace negotiations.³⁰

In October 1918, a revolution broke out in Budapest and a new government was formed by radical and social democratic forces of the former opposition. Without giving up the aim of preserving the territorial integrity of the country, the new Károlyi-government was ready to grant extensive rights to nationalities. Minority minister Oszkár Jászi, who was entrusted with the preparation of autonomy for ethnic minorities, planned to establish an “Eastern Switzerland”, a federation of autonomous ethnic cantons in Hungary in which every territorial unit would have had representation in the central government. He also professed the idea that the status of nationalities should be decided in plebiscites. As he declared in the “Short catechism on the right of ethnic minorities living in Hungary to self-government”:

“the Hungarian People’s Government already accepts the competence of the peace conference in advance relating to a resolution by virtue of which Slovaks and Romanians, Serbs and Rut-

²⁹ Romsics 1999, *op. cit.* 64-68.

³⁰ Romsics 2007, *op. cit.* 61-64, 68, 71-73.

henians living in Hungary can decide on their own by means of referendum which country they wish to belong to".³¹

These plans were, however, refused by the representatives of ethnic minorities as they, by that time, had already tended to separate themselves from the Hungarian nation-state. Despite this, the Károlyi-government believed that the Paris conference would draft the terms of peace based on the Wilsonian principles and therefore it did not offer military resistance against invading Czech, Serbian and Romanian armies. The Revolutionary Governing Council of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, which governed the country between March and August 1919, took actions to reconquer the occupied territories but it finally met the claim of the Supreme Council to evacuate the recaptured territory of Upper Hungary/Slovakia, and its offensive against Romanian forces in the East collapsed within some days. Romanian troops seized most part of what remained of Hungary including Budapest at the beginning of August, and the Hungarian Soviet Republic collapsed.³²

It was only at the beginning of December 1919 that the Supreme Council invited the Hungarian government to the peace conference.³³ As it turns out from the statement of Albert Apponyi, the leader of the peace delegation, the Hungarian standpoint was based on insisting on the integrity of Hungary's historical territory; the government was, however, ready to hold territorial plebiscites in order to put into effect the principle of national self-determination.³⁴ According to this, the preparatory notes, which had been completed for the Allied Powers before the delegation went to Paris, stressed mainly historical arguments, such as the thousand-year existence of the Hungarian statehood and Hungary's fight in defence of Europe against Ottoman

³¹ Domokos László: *Kis káté a Magyarországon élő nemzetek önrendelkezési jogáról*. Budapest: Lantos A. Könyvkereskedése. 1919, 15.

³² Romsics 1999, *op. cit.* 91-94, 98-99, 105-108; Romsics 2007, *op. cit.* 73-78, 97-100, 104-106, 110.

³³ Galántai József: *A trinanonni békekötés 1920. A párizsi meghívástól a ratifikálásig*. Budapest: Gondolat. 1990, 61.

³⁴ Romsics 2007, *op. cit.* 119.

expansion. Economic arguments were also brought forward which demonstrated that the Carpathian Basin represented an organic economic unity which was reasonable to be maintained further on.³⁵ Nevertheless, the so-called introductory memorandum of 14 January 1920 (Nr. II) stated that “[...] the Hungarian peace delegation does not intend and does not ask the persistence of the pre-war status quo” but it requested from the Supreme Council “to render it possible for Hungarian peoples and nationalities living on Hungarian soil to lay down the frameworks of their future life and relations by means of consultations and mutual agreement on their own”.³⁶ The memorandum on Transylvania (Nr. VIII) declared that even if the territory were incorporated into Romania, this could happen only by virtue of a decision made by the peoples living there. It also left the door open before wide-ranging political autonomy for the whole region if a plebiscite should decide so.³⁷

The Hungarian delegation received the terms of peace on 15 January. The draft envisaged the annexation of about two-thirds of the territory of Hungary and of 3.3 million ethnic Hungarians. On the following day, when Albert Apponyi held a speech in front of the representatives of the five great powers, he explicitly referred to the contradiction between the principles proclaimed by the Allied Powers prior to the peace negotiations and the planned settlement of the Hungarian case. He also claimed for a plebiscite in order to find out the wish of the population concerned. As he said:

³⁵ Szarka László: A magyar békejegyzékek érvrendszere és a trianoni békeszerződés. In: Szarka László (ed.): *Duna-táji dilemmák. Nemzeti kisebbségek – kisebbségi politika a 20. századi Kelet-Közép-Európában*. Budapest: Ister. 1998, 128-136.

³⁶ „When this unity is emphasized, the Hungarian delegation does not wish and does not demand the return to the *status quo* before the war!” (...) „We hereby kindly ask the Supreme Council to grant the opportunity to the Hungarian nation and the nations living in Hungary to decide on their future and relations by means of common discussion and agreement.” M. Kir. Külügyminisztérium (ed.): *A Magyar béketárgyalások. Jelentés a magyar békeküldöttség működéséről Neuilly s/S.-ben 1920 januárius-március havában*. Vol. I. Budapest: M. Kir. Tudományegyetemi Nyomda. 1921, 17. Partly also cited by Szarka 1998, *op. cit.* 350. endnote 12. and Romsics 2007, *op. cit.* 122.

³⁷ M. Kir. Külügyminisztérium (ed.) 1920, *op. cit.* Vol. I. 125, 133.

"[...] In the name of the great principle so happily phrased by President Wilson, namely that no group of people, no population may be transferred from one State to the other without being first consulted, – as though they were a herd of cattle with no will of their own, – in the name of this great principle, an axiom of good sense and public morals, we request, we demand a plebiscite on those parts of Hungary that are now on the point of being severed from us. I declare we are willing to bow to the decision of a plebiscite whatever it should be. Of course, we demand it should be held in conditions ensuring the freedom of the vote. [...]"³⁸

After the speech, a map was also presented which demonstrated the ethnic conditions in the Carpathian Basin and which showed to what extent the planned new borders did not correspond to the ethnic borders.

The claim for plebiscite was repeated in the official reply made by the Hungarian delegation to the terms of peace on 12 February.³⁹ This note also contained detailed articles on how the vote should be organized. It was laid down that all the regions between Hungary's actual borders and the borders set out by the draft treaty should be subject to referendum. The proposal would have empowered a commission of the Allied Powers and the representatives of the Hungarian government to specify the territories in which a popular vote should take place. In this respect, the reply provided that the plebiscite zones should be determined with regard to the ethnic conditions but the economic circumstances should also be taken into consideration. A proposal for these regions was prepared, too.⁴⁰ The official reply of the Hungarian

³⁸ Deák, Francis: *Hungary at the Paris Peace Conference. The Diplomatic History of the Treaty of Trianon*. New York: Morningside Heights – Columbia University Press. 1942, 543.

³⁹ M. Kir. Külügyminisztérium (ed.) 1921, *op cit.* Vol. II, 2.

⁴⁰ Unfortunately, the huge volumes of the Hungarian Foreign Ministry (see footnote 37) do not include this proposal. Romsics published, however, a map that had been put forward by the Hungarian diplomacy to French interlocutors. It indicates territories that were unconditionally claimed by the Hungarian diplomacy and other zones –

delegation also suggested that special commissions should be set up and be authorized to draw the final boundaries in accordance with the result of the votes.⁴¹

The Allied Powers replied to Apponyi's objections and requests at the beginning of May. The reply rejected any modification to the territorial clauses laid down in the terms of peace. As the Allies stated, they had been guided by the consideration that any modification to the borders fixed by them would lead to inconveniences graver than those proclaimed by the Hungarian Delegation. The reply also added that:

"The ethnographical conditions in Central Europe are such that it is indeed impossible for the political frontiers in their total extent to coincide with the ethnical frontiers." [...] "If the Allied and Associated Powers have thought it unnecessary to have recourse to a popular vote (of this nature), it has not been until acquiring the certitude that such a consultation, if carried out with all guarantees of complete sincerity, would not offer a result differing sensibly from those which they have arrived at after a minute study of the ethnographic conditions of Central Europe and of national aspirations. The will of the people was expressed in October and November of 1918 at the collapse of the Dual Monarchy when the populations, oppressed for so long, united with their Italian, Romanian, Yougo-Slav and Czecho-Slovak kindred."⁴²

the region of Eperjes and Transcarpathia, the Timis region and Burgenland in West Hungary – on the future of which Hungary suggested to hold plebiscites – Romsics 2007, *op. cit.* 139.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 3-4. Galántai thinks that the idea of partial plebiscites was closer to the reality than other claims, the main line of the argumentation of the Hungarian peace delegation, however, did not change – Galántai 1990, *op. cit.* 99. Romsics points out that a shift from the arguments based on historic right and geographic-economic unity can be observed towards the argumentation with the self-determination of the people by means of plebiscite – Romsics 2007, *op. cit.* 129.

⁴² Deák 1942, *op. cit.* 552.

4 Concluding Remarks and the Sopron Plebiscite

There can be no doubt that the post-war Hungarian settlement and the new borders did not correspond to the Wilsonian principles: considerable masses of ethnic Hungarians who lived in relatively homogeneous blocks near the borders came under the rule of neighbouring countries. In this respect, plebiscites held in these territories would have most probably led to a different outcome. The main question is, however, to what extent the Hungarian tactics were appropriate to change the plans of the Allied Powers. The question “what would it be like if...” is, of course, out of the scope of historical scholarship. Nevertheless, it is clear that the persistence on the territorial integrity of Hungary did not look promising in spite of the fact that a general claim for plebiscites had been put forward by the Hungarian peace delegation in addition to the historical and economic arguments. Austria, from this point of view, pursued a different but perhaps more effective strategy: the Austrian government accepted the disintegration of the Habsburg Empire as a given condition and insisted on the retention of only the undoubtedly German-speaking parts of the country. Thereby, it could genuinely refer to the principle of self-determination and request plebiscites in all territories that were populated by a German majority. Even so, Austria could achieve a single plebiscite in the Klagenfurt area and managed to get most parts of Burgenland, a territory of Western Hungary mostly inhabited by Austrians.⁴³ It was not until the Hungarian peace delegation had received the official terms of the peace that they came forward with a more detailed proposition regarding plebiscites. By this time, however, the chance to win at least some members of the Supreme Council for the cause had been rather thin. Maybe, if the Hungarian diplomacy had focused on some pure Hungarian regions next to the new borders and had insisted on referenda to be carried out there right from the very beginning, rather than stressing the historical integrity of old Hungary, the chance to alter the conditions of peace would have

⁴³ Galántai 1990, *op. cit.* 77-78.

been bigger.⁴⁴ Such behaviour, however, would have certainly been interpreted in the motherland as an unpardonable renunciation. It was practically impossible to do so from the perspective of inner politics. As Ibolya Murber points it out: the Hungarian government had, at the end of the World War, no widely-accepted idea of the state by means of which the traditional conception based on Hungary's territorial integrity could have been replaced.⁴⁵ This was certainly true during the peace negotiations, too.

The only plebiscite that was held on the territory of historical Hungary in connection with the post-war settlement was not envisaged by the peace treaties. The Treaty of Saint-Germain awarded Burgenland, a territory of Hungary (4,500 square kilometres with 350,000 inhabitants), to Austria without any kind of popular consultation. Most part of the population was German-speaking. On the day appointed for the takeover (28 August 1921), however, different paramilitary groups – partly supported by the Hungarian government – prevented the Austrian gendarmerie from marching into the territory. Finally, an agreement was brokered between István Bethlen Hungarian prime minister and Johannes Schober Austrian chancellor, according to which the population of one part of Burgenland, the city of Sopron (Ödenburg) and its environs had to decide by plebiscite which country they wished to belong to. The vote took place between 14 and 16 December and the majority (65%) voted for Hungary. The remaining (bigger) part of Burgenland was attached to Austria.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ At least – as Romsics points it out – the critique of the terms of peace from the Hungarian government could have provoked more sympathy if this critique had been based on national principle – Romsics 2007, *op. cit.* 130.

⁴⁵ Murber Ibolya: Az osztrák és a Magyar válságkezelés 1918-1920. Hasonlóságok és különbségek a közös birodalom összeomlását követően. In: *Századok* 152(6). 2018, 1301.

⁴⁶ Ormos Mária: *Civitas fidelissima. Népszavazás Sopronban 1921.* Győr: Gordiusz. 1990.; Zsiga Tibor: Mikor volt az első népszavazás? In: *Beltügyi Szemle* 28(2). 1990, 78-83.

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