

How New Borders After the First World War Failed to Resolve Ethnic Tensions

The dramatic border changes following the First World War re-sized and created entirely new states in areas where multiple ethnic groups cohabited. The new borders grouped together people of different ethnicities into single nation states which lacked unity, creating conflict between nationalist majorities supporting the state and ethnic minority groups. This essay will primarily consider examples from Central Europe, where the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian, German and Russian empires led to the formation of multi-ethnic Poland, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia.

The new borders, put in place following declarations of independence and the treaties of Saint-Germain, Trianon and Versailles, took territory from vanquished Germany, Austria and Hungary and attempted to fulfil nationalist wishes according to the principle of self-determination. However, they failed to create either ethnically homogenous nation states or unified multi-ethnic states, leading to ethnic tensions deriving both from nationalist majorities (who feared the threat of minorities which could act as a destabilizing force) and minority groups (who protested their lack of political power). If ethnic tensions are taken to mean opposition or conflict between different ethnic and/or national groups, then the new borders can most certainly be said to have failed in resolving them. Indeed, if the word 'resolve' suggests to simply solve pre-existing ethnic tensions, the new borders not

only failed to do this but also produced new ethnic tensions. After the First World War, old ethnic tensions, such as those between Czechs and Germans in Bohemia, become violent, and new national struggles appeared, such as those between Czechs and Poles in Teschen Silesia.¹ Historians agree that in most areas changing borders led to increased conflict between cohabiting ethnic groups. Gerwarth attributes this to the creation of multi-ethnic states with large ethnic minority populations and loss of territory from other states, but Drapac draws attention to the fact that in Yugoslavia it was the marginalization – rather than creation – of minorities which led to greater ethnic tension.²

New borders failed to resolve ethnic tensions by creating new multi-ethnic states with minorities within them. The creation of smaller nation states from the territories of previous empires was not carried out along ethnic or national lines due to the ethnic complexity of these territories. Rather, borders were founded on irrelevant historic precedents, which did not represent the reality of contemporary populations. For example, the borders of the new state of Czechoslovakia were drawn according to the historic rights of Bohemian Crownlands. Rather than a plebiscite or other form of self-determination, resulting in the new state containing a huge ethnic minority, 23 per cent of the population were ethnic Germans, which represented a larger proportion of the population than the Slovaks.³ Similarly, the new borders of the enlarged

¹ Robert Gerwarth, *The vanquished: why the First World War failed to end, 1917-1923* (London: Allen Lane, 2016), p. 512.

² Ibid.; Vesna Drapac, *Constructing Yugoslavia: A Transnational History* (Basingstoke, 2010).

³ Nancy Wingfield, *Minority Politics in a Multinational State: The German Social Democrats in Czechoslovakia, 1918-1938* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 9; Gerwarth, *The vanquished*, p. 516.

state of Greater Romania included about 3 million Hungarians, estranged from their homeland and uncomfortable with their sudden status as a minority following years of dominant status in areas such as Transylvania.⁴ This creation of new multi-ethnic states where minorities lacked self-determination led to tension between ethnic groups who had no clear national identity to unite them. In Yugoslavia, for example, the different national groups including Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, had no shared Yugoslav identity to unite them; certain groups, such as the Croats and Macedonians, feared that their inclusion in this multi-ethnic state threatened their 'existence as distinctive peoples'.⁵ This reluctance of minorities to be included in new nation states is also evident in the aversion of Hungarians in Transylvania at becoming a minority under the new Greater Romania. Despite statements by the Romanian government that minorities would be protected, almost two hundred thousand fled as refugees to the smaller new state of Hungary.⁶ These examples indicate how new borders, in creating multi-ethnic states, fuelled fear and tension between ethnic groups.

The new borders also failed to resolve ethnic tensions within these new multi-ethnic states, as they did not grant equal power to each ethnic group. It was implicit in the creation of these united nations with a united national identity that the largest ethnic or national group would have the majority in united parliament, where they would consistently outnumber – and therefore outvote – minority groups, giving them a huge amount of political power and leaving ethnic minorities marginalized. This can be seen in the example of Yugoslavia. Drapac argues that Yugoslavia was not doomed from the start, which is convincing in light of the fact that even the minority Croat leader Stjepan Radić accepted the state.⁷ He opposed, however, the Serbian domination in the state, as the Croats were

a permanent parliamentary minority which the Serbs could consistently outvote.⁸ The result of this dissatisfaction was his petition with over 115,000 signatures sent to the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, requesting international support for the Croats' right to self-determination.⁹ This is a clear indicator that the new borders failed to resolve ethnic tensions through their marginalization of minority groups who lost power in the new multi-ethnic states.

The real problem for the Croats was not their assimilation into the multi-ethnic state of Yugoslavia, but their loss of the significant autonomy they had been granted under Austro-Hungarian rule. The Slovenes, who had been assimilated into Yugoslavia just as the Croats had, were happy to cohabit with the Serbs, as their position in Yugoslavia was an improvement from their previous fragmentation. They had previously had no autonomy, and were now represented in government, with the power to self-administer their Slovenian territory.¹⁰ The only difference for the Croats was that in being included in Yugoslavia they had lost power. The same difficulty with the marginalization of an ethnic minority bringing about greater ethnic tensions can be seen in the new state of Czechoslovakia, where land reform in 1921 did not distinguish between ethnic groups, unifying them all under a single nationality – and as a result affected Hungarian land-owning nobility in Transylvania disproportionately, with much of their land being handed over to Romanian peasants.¹¹

It is also worth considering ethnic tensions in states within whose new borders there was little ethnic diversity. Despite their ethnic homogeneity in comparison to other states, the loss of territory to countries such as Germany and Hungary produced nationalist concerns over regaining these lost territories, which in turn bred hostility towards other ethnic groups. An example of the effect of these new borders is the evolution of the

⁴ Ibid., p. 517.

⁵ Drapac, *Constructing Yugoslavia*, p. 96; Ibid., p. 109.

⁶ Holly Case, 'The "Transylvanian Question" and European Statehood', in *Between States: The Transylvanian Question and the European Idea during World War II* (Stanford, 2009), p. 27.

⁷ Drapac, *Constructing Yugoslavia*, p. 96; Ibid., p. 112.

⁸ Ibid., p. 112.

⁹ Ibid., p. 111.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 109.

¹¹ Case, 'The "Transylvanian Question"', p. 27.

Friedrich Wilhelms University in Breslau (Germany). This changed from a traditionally cosmopolitan institution with many ethnic minority Polish and Jewish students, to a focal point for German nationalists hostile to the cohabitation of different ethnic groups. The popularity at the university of Walter Kuhn, who lectured on the need to reverse the Treaty of Versailles and recover 'lost' German populations in Poland and Central Europe, shows how the new borders created by treaties after the First World War led to this popular irredentist movement in areas such as Breslau.¹² The resentment towards the new borders in turn fueled right-wing nationalism at the University, which brought with it greater hostility towards Breslau's ethnic minority populations.

Another source of ethnic tension in the more ethnically homogeneous states was the presence of refugees from lost territories, who put pressure on their governments to regain their native lands. Both Case and Gerhart agree on the importance of refugees in Hungary, where Gerhart describes the 420,000 refugees from lost territories as a 'radicalizing presence'.¹³ This description may be somewhat exaggerated however, as Case shows that Hungarian leaders took little diplomatic action to regain lost territories.¹⁴ To some extent however the refugees contributed to ethnic tension: refugees from areas such as Transylvania struggled to find employment in the smaller new Hungary, and their dissatisfaction manifested in constant activism, lobbying for the reversal of the Treaty of Trianon. In this way, the new borders put in place following the First World War encouraged a particular breed of nationalism which created new ethnic tensions in German and Hungarian concerns over lost territories and displaced populations. Due to their greater national unity and lack of significant minority populations, ethnically homogeneous states might be expected not to have experienced escalated ethnic tensions following the changes to borders. However, internal pressure from

nationalists and refugees wanting to expand the nation state beyond the new borders catalysed more fervent ethnic tension.

In considering these examples of post-war changes to borders in Central Europe – as ethnic tensions may have originated differently in areas such as Belarus and Ukraine, which have not been covered here – it seems clear that the ethnic tensions which arose in the interwar period were caused by the redistribution of power between ethnic groups. Before the First World War, ethnic tensions had existed, but within looser structures such as the framework of the Austro-Hungarian Empire they had not been as observable. With the new borders creating new nation states and the marginalisation of previously more powerful or autonomous ethnic groups such as the Germans in Bohemia, Hungarians in Transylvania and Croats, ethnic conflicts were catalysed by the desire to fight for lost territory and political autonomy.

The change from multi-ethnic empires to multi-ethnic nation states was instrumental in the new borders' failure to resolve ethnic tension. It caused the significant increase in ethnic conflict because of the marginalisation of groups within those multi-ethnic nation states, and the subsequent, similarly threatening loss of territory for certain national groups. Political power and autonomy were key points of contention for the new multi-ethnic nation states. Certain groups, such as the Croats, were perfectly happy to exist within a multinational state as they had done before – they only opposed Yugoslavia because they had been marginalised within it.¹⁵



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¹² Gerwarth, *The Vanquished*, p. 514.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 513.

¹⁴ Case, 'The "Transylvanian Question".'

¹⁵ Drapac, *Constructing Yugoslavia*, p. 96; *Ibid.*, p. 112.

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