

**Bencsik, P. (2022). *Demarkációs vonaltól államhatárig: A határ menti társadalom és konfliktusai az 1920-as években (From Demarcation Line to State Border: Society at the Border and Its Conflicts in the 1920s)*. ELKH.**

Teodor Gyelnik

Central European Service for Cross-border Initiatives

teodor.gyelnik@cesci-net.eu

History can be seen as a ceaseless fight between two antagonistic tendencies, namely territorialisation and de-territorialisation. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, borders were characterised with the process of de-territorialisation, their limiting role was decreased and movement was free across the imperial borders. A major break of de-territorialisation was the First World War. The borders were closed due to wartime conditions. Subsequently, a territorialisation tendency monopolised border regions. These processes were accelerated by the Second World War and taken into extreme levels by the bipolar world order, iron curtain and the COCOM list.

ELKH issued a remarkable attention-grabbing book in Hungarian language with title '*Demarkációs vonaltól államhatárig: A határ menti társadalom és konfliktusai az 1920-as években*' / '*From Demarcation Line to State Border: Society at the Border and Its Conflicts in the 1920s*'. The book aims to research the territorialisation processes after the First World War and it performs an interesting border research of everyday life of the post-war borders

of Hungary, which were established by the Treaty of Trianon. The author explores the transformation of the everyday elements and living habits of agrarian society by the new post-war borders. The author used two primary source groups during his research, namely archival and press documents of that time. Unfortunately, oral history research of the events is impossible due to time distance, because those who directly experienced the events are no longer alive.

The book explains the changes in the post-war borders as a shift from the western to eastern conception of borders in Central Europe. The western conception of borders is based on law enforcement and non-military principles, while the main function of the border regime is to identify, register and/or control. This western conception of borders allows the functioning of an open society and the citizens are not restricted by the state apparatus. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the whole world was ruled by the Western European empires within the frame of their colonial policies. This policy establishment allowed the Europeans

to move freely around the whole world, while the colonial population did have much less opportunities for the same free movement. On the other hand, the eastern conception of borders can be characterised as a restrictive and an 'inward-looking' policy approach, because it interprets the surrounding environment as hostile, thus there is a need to install barriers between the outside and inside. Its main task is to control the movement of its own population. A state regime with eastern conception of borders sees the borders through militarist lenses, it aims to strictly limit emigration and to preserve its human power within the state. These state regimes are often described as authoritative.

Before the First World War, the majority of the European continent and the imperial borders were driven by western conception, and the eastern conception was rather present in the Tsardom of Russia and in some parts of the Balkans. Austria-Hungary was a space between the two border conceptions, specifically, its east and south borders were closer to the eastern conception, while all the other border sections were driven by western conception.

The First World War was a major shift in the conception of borders and all the borders were shifted towards the militarised and closed structures. After the war, Western Europe achieved to bring back the principle of open borders. Unfortunately, Central and Eastern parts of Europe were unable to do the

same even after the war. This could be explained by many factors. The first major factor was the disintegration of Austria-Hungary; subsequently, the newly appearing countries around Hungary had territorial disputes, conflicts were strongly present and these required the installation of more limited borders. In other words, the newly emerging countries in Central Europe did not have any interests to install the western conception of borders with Hungary, like movement and open borders, but they rather preferred the eastern interpretation of borders. Even after the termination of the war, capitulation and signature of the peace treaties, the armed conflict still continued in some parts of Eastern Europe (Polish-Ukrainian, Polish-Soviet) until 1923 and this was a significant factor for maintaining closed borders. Moreover, international changes also played their major role in promoting hard borders. On the one hand, the consolidation of bolshevism and the Soviet Union notably supported the closed borders in order to prevent the infiltration of the Bolshevik agents, propaganda and the spread of communist ideas. On the other side, the age of mass emigration came to an end when the United States of America introduced migration quotas.

As the author writes (p. 19), "*one of the main legacies of the war was the slow transformation of the border regime*" (translations are made by Teodor Gyelník). After the war, the new borders in Central Europe became a certain form of 'transitional' border, namely

neither fully open nor fully closed border regime. This in-between structure of the borders between eastern and western conception established an appropriate environment for future shifts in the border conception; consequently, the Central European region could be much more easily transformed into a strict, sovietised eastern border structure after 1945.

The book thoroughly introduces the most important elements of the border control system and the legal/illegal border crossings by the local people. After the First World War, the post-war agreement gave very strict rules on the number of military personnel of Hungary. This means that the military was minimised in Hungary. As a reaction, Hungary attempted to establish latent military forces through border and custom guards. It is worth noting that the alteration of the pre-1914 open borders into a semi-eastern conception of borders created a space of competition between military and civil institutions over leadership and command of the borders.

Important post-war border element was the struggle against the so-called “unwanted elements”. The Hungarian government quickly became aware that passport requirements can block the inflow of the “unwanted elements”. This reality explains the sudden alteration of opinion on passport requirements of the Hungarian government. To be more specific, Hungary advocated an overall termination of the passport

requirements already in 1919 after the war; although, at the passport conference of the Central European countries in 1922, Hungary was a supporter of passport requirements since it was the only available tool to limit the infiltration of the “unwanted elements”. These “unwanted elements” were the arriving Jews from Galicia, the non-Hungarian ethnic people beyond the borders and the possible Bolshevik agents with communist ideas. Although, the post-war passport and visa requirements generated significant administrative difficulties, economic damages, disruption of a society, illegal border crossing with all the legal consequences, like penalties, criminal proceedings or even imprisonment.

The first immediate and very direct effect of the new post-war borders was that significant Hungarian communities remained beyond the border of Hungary, suddenly finding themselves under hostile governance and discriminatory administrative measures. The families, divided by the new borders, needed to maintain contacts, as they regularly did it before the war. It means that visiting the relatives and the divided families was an important post-war issue. Nevertheless, the passport and the general visa requirements caused serious obstacles in this effort. Receiving the passport and visa did not remove all the obstacles, but the visitor had to struggle with further major obstacles, for instance the border could be crossed at limited border crossings, while the distance between the border crossing stations could be

more than even 80 kilometres. In other words, long detours had to be made in order to reach a destination even only a kilometre beyond the border.

The peasant society was not ready for this kind of borders. They had visited the relatives without any problems during their whole life, but now there is a limitation. They did not even understand why it was forbidden when they had done it before. They often did not require any travel documents, they simply crossed the border illegally since the new borders were not protected in their full length. However, the illegal border crossing had legal consequences if somebody was caught.

The book underlines that the Hungarian authorities did not deal strictly with the border violators, especially when they were Hungarians. The punishments were minimal, but it largely depended on the individual behaviour of the judges. Some judges used all the possible pretexts to acquit the violators, while some judges were less forgiving. Subsequently, in those regions where the judges used all the pretexts, the illegal border crossing was a usual form of behaviour, while in those regions where the judges were stricter, the illegal border crossing decreased.

In other words, *“the existing legal order was formally kept, but at the same time, the violators were not deterred from repeating the violation.”* (p. 52) The authorities were fully aware about the disrupted family relations due to the

new borders and the maintenance of the family contacts were interpreted as a basic national interest. It was hoped that intensive Hungarian-Hungarian relations across the border would preserve the Hungarian structure of the separated region, thus assuring the possibility of future territorial revision and unification with Hungary.

The other significant, direct and immediate effect of the new post-war borders was the issue of agriculture and farmers. The new border often run across land holdings and farms (597 cases with Romania, 290 cases with Czechoslovakia, 100 cases with Yugoslavia and 24 cases with Austria). The most problematic area was the border section with Romania and Czechoslovakia, while the committee for border identification with Austria tried to identify the new border in a way to cut land holdings as rarely as possible, thus this issue was less critical with Austria.

Whether the land holding or farm became divided by the border was often dependent on success. The book gives an example: a grape-grower from the municipality of Geszt (Hungary) was working in his viticulture when the committee for border identification arrived. The grape-grower was able to convince the committee not to cut across his viticulture, but many land holders and farmers were less successful in their cases. Those farmers whose land holdings were divided by the new border and who had to cross the border

on a daily basis in order to perform the work on the land holdings and farms were called as 'dual owners'. At the beginning, landowners and farmers, living in the new border regions, did not understand the new reality. They did not comprehend why it is forbidden to do the same daily work that they did before the war. Therefore, they continued their work even if it was illegal and they simply crossed the borders on the same field roads as before.

Passport and visa documents were not appropriate options for the dual owners since those documents could not guarantee everyday crossing in the long run. Administrative management and financial expenses of the travelling documents meant excessive burden for the dual owners, while the border crossing was allowed only on limited border crossing points, whereas the lands and farms were far away from the border crossing stations. Subsequently, a limited border strip movement was agreed to handle the problem of the dual owners and residents of the new border regions.

Limited border strip movement was not a new idea and it was already applied before the First World War. Austria-Hungary preferred western conception of borders, but its Balkan borders and at its Eastern borders were structured around the eastern conception with a more closed border structure regime than at the western or north borders. The first limited border strip movement agreement was signed with Romania in

1873. This agreement allowed the border crossing in urgent cases for 30 days.

In spite of the fact that Hungary was surrounded by hostile countries, the limited border strip movement (small border traffic) agreements of the small traffic mirrored a diplomatic victory for Hungary. The hardest negotiations were with Romania and Yugoslavia, while the smoothest negotiations were with Austria. The border strip movement agreements differed from the pre-1914 period. As a result of the new agreements, dual landowners and residents of the border region could apply for a travel document more easily.

In other words, the small border traffic was part of a larger game that revolved around nation-building and the definitive fixing of borders. The Hungarian government thought that if they can maintain vivid contacts with the detached areas, those relations can be helpful in the revision processes. The negotiations were hard, namely the small border traffic was allowed only to 10-15 kilometres instead of the usual 40 kilometres and the bigger cities were not involved, thus for example Bratislava, Lučenec or the newly acquired Romanian cities were omitted. Furthermore, the dual owners of land holdings and farms were often objects of various financial harassment from both sides. The dual land owners often had to pay some money to the border guards when they wanted to transfer their products across the border. What is more, they were excessively taxed and they were often

limited by border closures as was the case with Czechoslovakia in 1923 after the incident in Chym. These realities caused the dual owners to experience extremely hardened everyday life after the new post-war borders.

The next serious issue of the new post-war borders was the disintegration of the imperial economic framework. The disrupted economic structure assured space for private foreign trade and smuggling. Smuggling was a new phenomenon in Hungary after the Trianon borders. It already appeared in 1914 and it grew stronger every year. The main reasons for smuggling were destitution, poverty, hunger, which became widespread after the mandatory submission of grain and other agricultural products, but also profiteering.

Ordinary people along the border entered into smuggling in order to assure their livelihood within the disrupted imperial economic framework. However, aside from the ordinary people, more modest peasants, Jewish merchants and members of the elite could also be found among the smugglers. Although, smuggling was not only an illegal behaviour of outlaws, but for example the Red Guard, which was a law enforcement organisation during the Hungarian Soviet Republic (1919), was also significantly involved in the illegal phenomenon. Subsequently, smuggling became a well organised form of activity, large-scale smuggling networks were formed, even in the form

of armed gangs with forward, sideguard and rear guard units.

Another major reason for smuggling was profiteering. Significant price differences were present at the two sides of the border, thus smuggling the cheaper products into the other side and selling them with a profit ratio. For example, big price differences were in the case of horses or cattle between Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The most important outward smuggling items from Hungary towards Czechoslovakia were live animals, alcohol, grain and food, whereas inward smuggling was dominated by industrial items, Bat̃a shoes, clothes, tools, chemicals and saccharin. Smuggling between Hungary and Romania was dominated by items, like pepper, salt, nuts, capsicum or even gold.

Smuggling became so widespread that the Hungarian textile industry required the closure of the post-war borders with barbed wire and other specific obstacles that could limit the border smugglers. It is interesting to see that security and material interests began to become more important in the anti-Trianon rhetoric than the revisionist propaganda emphasizing the unsettledness of the demarcation lines between Hungary and its neighbours. Instead of underlining the economic unity of Greater Hungary, the leaders of the textile industry accepted the existence of the new borders and even demanded their strengthening. As the author underlines (p. 83), *“The protection of economic interests significantly contributed to the consolidation of the borders.”*

What is more, gold, silver, precious stones and jewellery also became objects of smuggling. As a result of smuggling, the decrease in the country's stock of bullion was worrying, causing economic damages, financial imbalance of the post-war state, bankruptcy of small entrepreneurs (e.g. cordwainer) and a moral freefall of the post-war society.

Maintenance of smuggling was influenced by legal uncertainty, namely rapidly changing and confusing legislation, perplexity of domestic and foreign smuggling and different understanding (personal bias or revenge) and interpretation of smuggling in different counties. Smuggling was virulent until 1948, when the new communist government almost hermetically closed all the Hungarian borders that de facto closed the space for smuggling.

The next serious issue was the armed conflict across the post-war borders. The new borders were a result of a dictate instead of mutually based agreement, hence both sides felt inconvenience and tension. As a result, armed conflicts happened at every new border section. The common feature of the border incidents is that we cannot exactly determine which party was mainly responsible for the conflict. The parties involved in the incident always accused the other side, often exaggerating the cases to an extreme and propagandistic level.

Shortly after the borders were established, the Czechoslovak and

Hungarian border section was a hot topic. The most famous border incident happened in April 1923, in the vicinity of Chym (now, settlement in Slovakia). A Czech border guard, Ján Sedláček, was murdered. The Hungarian and the Czechoslovak narrations significantly differed from each other. Historians think that a third stakeholder, specifically a smuggling gang, was also present in the conflict which was omitted from both narratives, thus explaining the significant narrative differences between Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

As a reaction, the Czechoslovak government closed the borders, even the dual landowners could not cross the border to do the spring tasks on their lands and farms. Moreover, Czechoslovakia ordered the seizure of the property of many citizens with Hungarian ethnicity and they had to leave their homes across the Roňava/Ronyva river. For instance, Jenő Szutor, a reformed pastor, was also ordered to leave Czechoslovakia. 35 thousand people wrote a petition in support of the pastor which was addressed to the President of Masaryk. Nonetheless, the call to cancel the ordination against the pastor was ignored.

Furthermore, the author describes interesting similarities between the post-First World War and post-Second World War policy measures. In both post-war environments, austerity measures were applied, like mandatory submission of agricultural products, planned economy, scapegoating exclusionary processes

and even show trials. During the twenties, the scapegoating processes were mainly implemented on a racial basis, where the Jews became pariahs within the society, whereas during the fifties, the scapegoating processes were implemented on the class basis, where the land holders peasants were the new stigmatised. In other words, the political events of the 50s were not new for the peasantry and it profoundly facilitated the achievement of the successes of the violent communist agrarian policy and Stalinisation of society.

To sum up, the book of Péter Bencsik *‘Demarkációs vonaltól államhatárig: A határ menti társadalom és konfliktusai az 1920-as években’ / ‘From Demarcation*

*Line to State Border: Society at the Border and Its Conflicts in the 1920s’* offers a very interesting research on the everyday border-making mechanisms in Central Europe after the First World War.

The book is valuable with its local level approach. It underlines the local, everyday life layer of the new post-war border instead of the state and/or nation based geopolitical approach. The book is primarily recommended for the academic community, students of political sciences, history, international relations, border studies and it is recommended for people who are interested in topics like, nation, nationalism, ethnicity, post-war borders, Trianon borders, post-world war Hungary.