

SELF-DETERMINATION AND THE DIFFICULTY OF CREATING NATION-STATES: THE TRANSYLVANIA CASE*

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ABSTRACT. In the lead-up to the World War I Paris Peace Conference the United States convened The Inquiry—a group of leading scholars—to propose equitable terms, including new borders, for the final peace settlements. In many areas throughout Europe, among them Transylvania, coming to a settlement that fully accounted for Woodrow Wilson’s principle of self-determination proved difficult. Hungary’s populace comprised many nationalities, some very hostile toward Romania, the state that eventually acquired the entire region. In this article I analyze how the American plan differed from that finally adopted at the conference and how closely The Inquiry’s plan for Transylvania followed the principles laid out by President Wilson in his famous “Fourteen Points,” which provided the basis for American participation in World War I. The ethnic mix within Transylvania made it an especially difficult region in which to apply Wilsonian principles. *Keywords:* *Borders, Europe, nationalism, peace treaty, Transylvania, World War I.*

Transylvania, the rugged region that marks the southernmost extension of the Carpathian Mountains of Eastern Europe, evokes images of Count Dracula and other elements of Western mythology. However, for both the Hungarian and Romanian peoples, Transylvania symbolizes the birthplace of their respective nations. Transylvania is, and for thousands of years has been, an ethnically mixed region. As such, it was highly contested between the Hungarians and Romanians at the end of World War I, and it remains a thorn in Hungarian-Romanian relations to this day.

Only in the period immediately after World War I did the study of borders in political geography include analysis of the process of proposal and negotiation that precedes the creation of a new border, rather than focusing on a new boundary and its functions (Kolossov 2005, 611). Through the use of primary resources, especially maps contained in reports given to President Woodrow Wilson, along with the writings of scholars who worked for him, such as American Geographical Society (AGS) Director Isaiah Bowman, I investigate the process of redrawing Transylvania’s borders. By parsing the American proposal for reallocating Transylvania, along with other proposals for the region presented at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919,¹ it is possible to analyze the difficulties faced by the peacemakers at Paris in creating an equitable peace based on Wilson’s principles in as ethically heterogeneous an area

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