

# MINORITIES IN CENTRAL EUROPE

## A PLEA FOR TREATY REVISION

by

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At the present time when the eyes of Europe are fixed on disturbances caused by the restlessness of some big nations harbouring certain grievances inherent in the present world order, there is a regrettable tendency to ignore the plight of some of the smaller nations who, although the part they played in the Great War was not so noticeable in Western Europe as was the German nevertheless lost very considerably by the treaties which followed the conclusion of hostilities.

The cry of nationalism has been raised with an ever increasing intensity for the last two centuries, and it was supposed that by the treaties of Trianon and St. Germain en Laye, the problems presented by the heterogeneous nationalities which composed the old Austro-Hungarian empire had been solved once and for all. It remains to see how far the claims of the nationalities have been realised and whether the new frontiers as defined by the Treaties are in fact the best possible solution of the problem. The fate of Austria is well known in England; how she was ruthlessly shorn of her territory and inhabitants, until so little remained of her former glory that instead of being one of the great powers of Europe she became merely a bone of contention between her northern and southern neighbours, has been frequently described in the English press. Far less however is known about her former partner Hungary, a state having behind it a thousand years of glorious history, a state which in the past more than once saved Europe from Tartar and Turkish invasion, and which has now through no fault of its own been reduced to the status of a minor power.

There can be only two grounds for remaking the frontiers of any state: the first and most important of these, and one which was moreover totally disregarded in the drawing up of the peace

treaties, lies in the deliberate expression of the will of the inhabitants of the affected territories manifested in a plebiscite or some other similar means. In the negotiations preceding the delineation of the new frontiers of central Europe, there was nothing approaching an attempt to obtain the views of the inhabitants of the areas concerned.

The only other reason is conquest by war and this is nowadays, theoretically at any rate of doubtful validity. In this case it is perfectly futile to suggest the right of conquest as a basis for the new frontiers, if only for the reason that neither the Austrians nor the Czechs nor the Slovaks nor the Croats ever defeated the Hungarians on the field of battle because all these races were integral parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and as such fought side by side with the Hungarians against the allies in the world war: yet they all profited at her expense on the conclusion of hostilities.

It is not hard to see what principles the representatives of the Great Powers followed when drawing up the treaties which have already brought about the economic downfall of Hungary, and have created a situation in the Danube valley which may well endanger the peace of Europe in the near future. Although in the years before the war there was considerable agitation amongst the members of the non-Magyar communities living in Hungarian territory in favour of autonomy and secession, there can be no doubt that the treaties were made, and the new boundaries defined, not to satisfy nationalist claims but solely for strategic reasons and at French demand; they bear "made in France" stamped on every corner, and form part of the interminable attempts on her part to secure allies to outweigh the imaginary menace on her eastern frontier.

In the breakdown of the Austro-Hungarian empire at the end of the war, she saw her chance

to form an alliance in eastern and southern Europe which should replace her now defunct ally Russia, and for this reason championed the claims of those Czechs and Croats who wished to set up independent republics for themselves and to retire from the courts of Vienna and Budapest.

The kingdom of Hungary before the war was an almost perfect example of an ethnographical and geographical unit: ringed about with high mountains forming an almost uninhabited and uninhabitable belt, Hungary contained a vast majority of Hungarian speaking people distributed over the vast plain of the middle Danube and the Theiß. The frontiers given her by the powers at Trianon and St. Germain en Laye follow no principle of ethnography or geography; by these treaties Hungary has been reduced by more than 71% of her former size and occupies a ridiculous position in the centre of the plain with foreign and mainly hostile countries in possession not only of the mountains but of a wide strip of the plain on the Hungarian side as well. An example of the futility of this frontier may well be seen in the neighbourhood of Sátoraljaújhely where the Czech-Hungarian frontier follows the line of a shallow ditch through the fields about 20 miles from the foot of the mountains.

Not only has Hungary lost 71% of her territory but also by the treaties 3½ million Hungarians were arbitrarily transferred to other states, two million of these now live on or near the present frontier, while another large outlying mass have been incorporated within the confines of the new Rumania.

The states now bordering on Hungary, contained the following numbers of Hungarians among their population, Rumania 1.463.573 (9.1%), Yugo-Slavia 467.658 (3.9%), Czecho-Slovakia 745.431 (5.6%). These Hungarians are all undergoing a process of denationalisation. In direct contrast with the former policy of the empire in which almost total cultural freedom was allowed to the several nationalities; in which the non-Hungarian speaking peoples were entitled in many areas to their own schools, and furthermore to use their respective languages as far as possible for administrative purposes; the Hungarian who now finds himself a Czechish, or a Rumanian, or a Yugo-Slav subject, suffers from being considered — to quote the memorandum of the Hungarian National Association to the League of Nations — "as a second rate citizen of his new state and of undergoing a process of gradual but systematic extermination".

Not only has Hungary been condemned by these treaties to a slow death from economic

starvation but a new and perilous situation has been created in Central Europe. The Czecho-Slovakian state is an entirely artificial creation. It is nearly double the size of the hereditary lands of the Czech crown, but in it the Czechs, even when taken together with the Moravians, formed in 1921 only 48.9% of the population; the remainder is made up of Germans, representing 22.9%, and who backed by the national-socialists have had considerable successes in the recent elections, 15.4% Slovaks who have nothing in common with the Czechs and desire to secure racial independence from them, 5.5% Hungarians desirous only of being allowed to rejoin the state from which they were forcibly removed and 3.4% Ruthenians, who, if allowed a plebiscite, would go either to Poland or to Hungary.

There is moreover a definite danger of Czecho-Slovakia being swamped by Russia, and there is more than one ground for believing that, whereas formerly France was the power behind the throne or rather the presidents chair, her place has now been taken by Russia, and in some circles it is believed that Czecho-Slovakia is to all intents already little more than a dependant state of the U. S. S. R.

The Treaty of Versailles is today reviled in many parts of Europe but that treaty does not merit this treatment nearly as much as do the subsidiary treaties by which the Austro-Hungarian empire was destroyed. That empire with all its defects did at least afford some measure of economic and political unity to the minorities of Central Europe. The states which replace it are too insignificant to stand alone, and can only exist by the good will of the great Powers. The lower Danube valley has always been the storm centre of Europe, but the storm centre has "moved rapidly northwards", and as a consequence has become far more of a danger to the peace of Europe.

Treaties made at the end of a long and bloody war must always be one-sided in their outlook for they are dictated by conqueror to conquered. Now is the time, when the intense jealousies and hatreds caused by the war are dying down, for an international commission composed of economists as well as politicians to investigate fully the problems of Central Europe and devise some better scheme for the settlement of the questions which are bound to arise, when in defiance of President Wilsons famous message peoples and territories are "arbitrarily transferred from one to another like pawns on a chess board".