

CZECHO-SLOVAKIA'S NATIONALITY PROBLEMS

BY

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(Continued)

The Defence of the State Act (1936.) made the restriction of the liberty and the economic inequality of the "nationality" citizens veritably and literally institutional. For under this Law practically all the minority settlement areas were pronounced to be "State defence zones", in which the real estate of the minority citizens could be expropriated at any time, while the practice of most branches of industry was made subject to the approval of the military authorities. Moreover, the said citizens — as "unreliable elements" — could be dismissed and removed at any time from establishments "of importance from the point of view of the Defence of the State", in whatever district those establishments might be situated, this provision applying, not only to owners, but also to simple workers.

All the non-Czech nationalities alike complain that their educational interests are being systematically overlooked and ignored for the benefit of the Czechs and that their cultural institutions are being unfairly treated by the State. A complaint voiced, not only by the Magyars and the Germans, but also by the other "nationalities", is that the "Czecho-Slovak" schools established in "minority" (i. e. "nationality") districts and the multifarious czechising and slovakising associations officially supported by the State, are being used for the purpose of "de-nationalising" the children and the lower grades of society: and the Slav nationalities too (the Slovaks, Ruthenians and Poles) are justly afraid that as a consequence of the preferential treat-

ment of the Czech language consistently displayed their children too and the lower strata of society are quite as seriously threatened by the danger of czechisation.

During the past twenty years there has not been the slightest alleviation of the situation of the non-Czech nationalities; indeed, there has been a constant deterioration in that situation due to the consistent anti-nationality policy of the Czech authorities. No proposals coming from the nationalities — however reasonable — have ever been granted a favourable hearing; questions asked by the nationalities in Parliament have either not been answered at all or only belatedly. The motion submitted repeatedly by their representatives to the effect that a parliamentary commission be delegated to investigate the nationality question, has never been even put up for discussion. But all the endeavours of the "nationalities" to improve their situation even at the cost of supporting Government have proved abortive. In vain did the majority of the Sudeta German deputies (1926—35) and then the minority of those deputies (1937—38) or the biggest Slovak Party (on two occasions, from 1918 to 1921 and from 1926 to 1929) accept seats in the Cabinet; the so-called "activist" movement did nothing at all to improve the situation of the Germans or the Slovaks respectively. In vain did the Hungarian National Party (in 1926) enter into negotiations with the biggest Czech Government Party (the Agrarians), asking for a written promise undertaking to comply with their extremely moderate demands; and in vain did the Hungarian (Magyar) Deputies and Senators (in 1936) vote at the last election of President for Dr. Edward Beneš, who had pronounced all their wishes to be such as could without difficulty be met: not only was there no improvement, there was actually a constant deterioration, in their situation. Equally abortive were the attempts made by certain Polish and Ruthenian Deputies to improve matters by offering Government their support. And when, on February 18th., 1937, as a consequence of the clouds lowering more and more menacingly on the international political horizon, the Czechs concluded with the Sudeta German parties an agreement guaranteeing the non-Czech nationalities a certain share in public contracts and the

reservation of a certain quota of posts in the public services, as well as facilities in respect of the use of minority languages in the official life of the country, it very soon transpired that these promises were not meant seriously and were not taken seriously by the Czech parties to the agreement.

This method of supercilious rigidity when things seem to be going right and of repeated perjury in days of crisis and uncertainty, combined with the policy of playing off the non-Czech nationalities against one another, was bound sooner or later to prove an expensive game. And it brought its natural penalty the moment the international firmament darkened over Czecho-Slovakia. At the historical session of the Prague Parliament on March 29th the Germans, Slovaks, Magyars and Poles in succession submitted their demands for autonomy, while the Ruthenians one day later filed their demands in writing. The whole world was made to realise that the 1920 Czecho-Slovak Constitution and the "nationality" policy developed from that Constitution — in defiance of international treaties a centralistic, anti-democratic, perfidious policy forcibly encouraging the work of extortion and de-nationalisation and confiscating every form of liberty — had aroused and stimulated the hatred of all non-Czech nationalities alike.