

THE KINDRED CHARACTER OF BRITISH AND HUNGARIAN CONSTITUTIONAL INSTITUTIONS

by

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Nothing proves better how valueless in politics is the primitive conception of race than the fact that, in character and genius, the nation figuring in history by no means conforms to the theory of racial kinship. Were race the only factor, or even the only determining factor, in that greatest of human values which constitutes the independent genius of a historical nation, Hungarian state-building and civilization should have run parallel with the state-building and civilization of our Turkish kindred, instead of with those of the British nation, with which we cannot claim any racial ties.

Against this it might be urged that in 1000 A. D., and for decades after, St. Stephen, with fire and sword, compelled the Hungarians to adopt Christianity; that therefore he drew his people away from the world of their racial kin, and that he destroyed the ancient Turco-Hungarian civilization, raised the altars of the old faith, and subjected the Hungarians to the rule of medieval Roman Catholic civilization. This, however, is but partially true; for St. Stephen with consummate wisdom did not exterminate the ancient forms of Hungarian society or of the political and military organisations. He merely brought them into conformity with the institutions of the Christian countries of Western Europe. What he rooted out was paganism. But even this half-truth is sufficient to prove my thesis that in the development of the character and genius of a nation other factors besides race play an important, often even a more important, part — e. g. an increased exchange of intellectual values among the nations, the pressure of a stronger race, the effect and transforming influence of a more advanced civilization; the spread of the institutions created by a cultural epoch, which gain ground by their very universality; etc.

I have just been reading the volume on Hungary of a German work „*Das Deutschtum in Aus-land*“. The book does all in its power to prove that Hungary's evolution as a political State and as a European cultural area, was due mainly to

German intellectual influences. This is a classical illustration of how fanaticism can pervert facts and narrow down the horizon of historical survey. If those fanatics who are determined at all costs to annex Hungary as a German intellectual colony are right, how can we explain Hungary's entirely individual development within the framework of European Christian civilization, from the days of St. Stephen to the present? Were they right, Hungary should have imitated, in major and minor things, the institutions and forms of life of the German Empire, and the Hungarian Constitution should have been modelled on the organization of the German State. Instead, we see that, in a manner not to be explained by proximity or influences of contact, the Hungarian State and Hungarian national life have, from their very beginnings, run parallel with British institutions, not with German ones. This is that *spiritual kinship* which is too complex a phenomenon and too delicate a product of history, to be explicable by race alone, or by environment in the widest sense of the word.

The truth is that in the Middle Ages, as well as in modern times, the Hungarians had scarcely any direct friendly or hostile contacts with England calculated to exert a determining, or even a cardinal, influence on the course of their lives. And yet there exists a spiritual kinship. If we attempt to deny it, we find ourselves up against indelible historical facts and the concrete reality of institutions. We need not invoke far-fetched theories and lose ourselves in their intricacies. All that is necessary is to compare the most fundamental manifestations of the souls of the British and Hungarian nations — institutions and literature — to discover a similarity between them which is not confined to superficial externals, but wells up from the creative sources of the national ego.

This does not mean that in refuting the assertions made in the above-mentioned German work — assertions betraying a trend only too frequent and rapacious —, we must go to the

other extreme and deny that the German Empire, whether as a political power, or through its civilization and genius, ever exerted an influence on the development of Hungarian culture and Hungarian stasheship. For a thousand years the two countries have been neighbours (as a rule hostile neighbours). There always was a certain amount of emigration — sometimes more, sometimes less — from Germany to Hungary. During the four centuries of Habsburg rule the actual state of things in Hungary was seldom in keeping with the laws of the Hungarian Parliament, which practically from decade to decade had to guarantee a new Hungary's independence. In fact there were times during those four hundred years when we were near to being incorporated in the Habsburg Empire and swallowed up in the great ocean of the Germanic race. But against these facts we can array the even stronger facts of Hungarian history. We can show that the inherent resistance of the Hungarian nation to an alien rule, to a foreign genius and foreign institutions, though it may have flagged now and then, was never entirely broken, and that after grievous periods of exhaustion there always followed others of great enthusiasm, eras of mighty intellectual and military revival. These, even when doomed to failure, were productive of some results. They brought fresh guarantees and new inward reinforcements to the cause of national self-defence. Nothing proves more signally the intellectual virility of the Hungarian nation, its independent spirit, its indomitable and indestructible strength of character — all of which qualities should have secured it a far better fate than the present wretched conditions — than the fact that all along and just in the most fundamental things Hungary, without any immediate contacts, has stuck fast to the original Anglo-Hungarian parallel lines prescribed by our sharply defined historical individuality.

And if the West as represented by Germany with its oppressive and absolutistic tendencies showed its hatred and disparagement of the independent Hungarian institutions, of our despised "Constitution", there have also been representatives of the German intellectual world — chiefly among its shining lights — who could not withhold their appreciation and admiration from the intellectual independence of the Hungarians, from their matchless historical self-confidence and particularly from the monumental construction of their Constitution. Metternich, the great reactionary, the master-builder and moving spirit of the Holy Alliance, was one of the German admirers of the Hungarian powers of organization.

We in Hungary feel that we need not be ashamed because the spiritual kinship between the British and the Hungarian nations has found so little expression in the historical achievements of the two countries. Britain is today the mightiest Empire in the world, greater and more puissant than was the Roman Empire or the Empire of Ghengis Khan; and in its stability and human perfection immeasurably superior. In the four centuries during which the Island Kingdom, smaller to begin with than Hungary, became a world power, Hungary, on the other hand, fell

from the height of power of the Middle Ages, and today lives the dismal vegetative life of a minor Danubian State. But did not Sweden, the Netherlands, and Spain also descend from their heights of power in the course of history? And if we, ourselves, have been guilty of grave errors, primarily — in my opinion at least — in the last quarter of the nineteenth and in the pre-war years of the twentieth century, we may still say that we have made heavier sacrifices of life and effort for the great universal European interests than perhaps any other country in Europe. And even in our abandoned state it was only after heroic struggles that we were gradually forced to surrender the splendid, well-balanced, and expansive Kingdom of Matthias Hunyady (1458—1490).

Low though we have fallen from a political power, we have always endeavoured to preserve the proud stamp of our national individuality, our thousand-years-old traditions, our independent genius, and our unsundered, pre-eminent primacy in the Danube Valley.

At the beginning of this article I mentioned our Constitutional institutions and our literature as indisputable manifestations of the Hungarian genius and documentation of the spiritual links between Britain and Hungary.

I do not propose to linger over the Magna Charta of 1216 or the Golden Bull of 1222. Enough has been said about them by others. But I ask: If we received the fundamental institutions of our civilization from the Germans, where is the German Bull which we might have copied? For it is certain that for lack of mutual contacts we had no opportunity of copying the Magna Charta? Was there any other country in Europe outside England and Hungary where the nation, itself, had such a decisive voice in legislation and where the spirit of state-building still fettered by the primitive forms of feudal civil law made its appearance in a shape closely approaching the modern conception of public law? Or what is the explanation of that other interesting coincidence of dates and ideas, namely the fact that when in 1322, during the reign of Edward II, the English Constitution clearly and unambiguously pronounced the joint legislative rights of King and Parliament, in Hungary, about the same time (during the reign of Andrew III — 1290—1301) the division of the power of State between the King and the political nation was effected? In Hungary and England, from the beginning of the fourteenth century, a constitutional monarchy and a constitutionalism conforming more and more to the spirit of public law gradually developed, and the onward march of this process was unchecked in both countries except now and then by violence; and even then the next generation always restored the continuity of constitutionalism. Meanwhile, in Germany the indescribable chaos surrounding the rights and duties of the monarch and his subjects lasted for centuries, and in Austria, even as late as the first half of the nineteenth century, the hereditary Austrian provinces were governed in an absolutely patriarchal manner, as the family estates of the Habsburg Emperors.

Like the British, the Hungarian Constitution

is eloquent proof of a matchless capacity for political organization. This may be attributed to two outstanding national qualities. The one is the marked and free individualism shared alike by Britons and Hungarians which refuses to brook a yoke imposed from above, and is determined to carve its own destiny. The other is the way Britons and Hungarians, in spite of that individualism and though proud and jealous of their human dignity, fit into collective systems, into the greatest of human collective systems — the nation, or the State. The phenomena of particularism, of the tribal spirit, of oligarchy, have frequently raised their heads in the course of history in both countries, and have sometimes seized control to the detriment of the national and political community. But only for a time, only transitionally, and always as the symptoms of some internal weakness or disease. What in this respect has been an exception in the histories of England and Hungary may be considered to have been the rule in Germany down to the days of Bismarck.

This strong individuality of the British and the Hungarians, and its subordination to the conception of the State — the national collective system — whether that conception was formulated in words, or manifested as a living force, constitute the secret of the spiritual kinship between the two nations.

They are qualities which urge both nations towards the most nearly perfect forms of national autonomy, and are, at the same time the ramparts behind which, now as in the Middle Ages, the free citizens of both States may preserve intact their rights and liberties.

Nothing, with the exception of the decline in our international prestige and the shrinking of our political power, can be more painful to a Hungarian than the thought that since the last thirty years of the nineteenth century, we have not developed our historical Constitution (the only one in Europe which is not a mere copy of the British Constitution or of its popularized revolutionary edition as adopted by the French) at such a pace and to such a degree of perfection as would enable us to keep up with the triumphant march of the British Constitution.

Unfortunately the natural development of an inherent disposition has been checked by many mistakes and by even more misfortunes. If we turn from our history in general and examine that of our literature, we see that it has latent in it a strong and free sense of individuality, coupled with a high-minded readiness to conform to the collective spirit. It is the same happy mixture of an empiricism, at once courageous and cautious, which goads man on to further development, and a commonsense rationalism which usually allows itself to be ruled by experience. Perhaps we might say that the Hungarians are endowed with slightly larger proportion of the rationalist's search after principles than of the empiricist's patience. Here the Hungarian genius slightly inclines towards French tendencies. An examination of our fundamental institutions and literature, however, leaves us in no doubt that our Constitution, our independent genius, and the construction of our civilization were achieved primarily by instinctive historical methods, not by imitation and theorising. In our history imitation and theorising have always been expedients, as they have been, to an even greater extent, in Britain.

All this confronts us with a historical *imperativus categoricus* which can neither be ignored nor defied. We Hungarians must be the most conscious and at the same time the most instinctive and consequently the most competent and successful champions of national self-government, parliamentarism and democracy in that bitter struggle against what they stand for initiated with such *élan* in Central Europe, chiefly at the instigation of the German National Socialists.

Prior to the Great War Hungarian politics seriously bore in mind the ancient parallel between the Hungarian and the British Constitution and often — perhaps too often — invoked British parliamentary precedents. In my opinion, now when constitutionalism and the methods of parliamentarism are being ruthlessly attacked on all sides, it would behove us once more to watch with vigilance British parliamentary life and to restore the almost severed spiritual ties between the constitutional worlds of the two countries.