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THE TRIBUNAL OF HISTORY

BY

ELEMÉR SZUDY

The fate of the Czecho-Slovak State — provoked by that State itself — has been accomplished. The country concerning which Herr Adolphus Hitler, Chancellor of the German Empire, last autumn so tellingly declared that it had been born of lying propaganda and had maintained its existence by means of a campaign of lies, at the first threat of violence fell to pieces like a house of cards.

If we would trace the origin of the drama we must hark back to the Munich Conference, at which the Four Great Powers of Europe decided to sever from the body of the Czecho-Slovak State those regions which had in any case never belonged organically to it; viz. the Sudeten German areas and the Magyar ethnic strip of territory fringing the frontier of Upper Hungary. When this decision had been taken and had been carried out in practice, it at once became evident that history could not come to a standstill, seeing that it had left two problems — those of the Slovaks and the Ruthenians — unsolved. — At Munich the so-called ethnic principle was asserted; though not to the extent and in the spirit rendered natural and desirable by the structure of the Czecho-Slovak State. For — even after the very extensive, though not complete, segregation of the German and Magyar elements — that State-formation still comprised two ethnic elements, the Slovak and the Ruthenian, which on the one hand were endeavouring to secure an independent State existence and on the other hand were anxious to return within the framework of the Kingdom of St. Stephen. From the moment when the independent Slovak and Ruthenian (or, as

Mgr. Volosin was pleased to call it, Ukrainian) Governments had been established, there was no possibility of checking the progress of fate. All the elements which had never been in reality coherent, being merely compelled to writhe in the clutch of an imaginary community, endeavoured as rapidly as possible to escape into the free waters of independence and self-determination.

And surely there was nothing in the world to hold together the Slovaks and the Czechs, who had never in the whole course of history formed one nation or one people. There was no identity of language to ensure that end, for the Slovak and the Czech languages are two entirely independent idioms, even though they are both Slav in origin. Each people has its own independent literature and culture, which in each case is jealously guarded; and the Slovaks in particular persistently refused to entertain the idea of an intellectual or cultural community. Was it the common ethnic origin, then, or a common history that should have bound the two peoples together? That is equally out of the question, seeing that, as is universally known, the Slovaks have at all times in their history had an independent ethnographic individuality, and that for more than a thousand years they lived in historical symbiosis, not with the Czechs, but with the Magyars.

The Ruthenians — an exceptionally brave, loyal and pious people known also as Little Russians — have not had so many points of contact with the Czechs even as the Slovaks. For centuries they have lived their own peculiar life on the slopes of the Carpathians, in brotherly agreement with the Magyars; and now that after the ridiculous and never really serious Ukrainian venture they have once more been given the opportunity to join the mother country, they have received with effusive joy and happiness the Hungarian troops coming to rescue them from the horrors of a reign of terror and from the pangs of hunger, bringing in exchange wellbeing and civil liberty, equality of rights and every guarantee of ethnic self-government.

The moment the Tiso Government had declared for

separation from Bohemia and had proclaimed Slovakia's independence, the Czecho-Slovak State ceased to exist. This event of far-reaching importance would seem at first to have upset the equilibrium of the central Prague Government; for the latter believed that the application of force would enable them to stem the course of events and to check the progress of fate. This Tiso Government was removed from office, the Prague Government at first appointing an individual of the name of Sivák to the office of Prime Minister, his appointment being followed 24 hours later by that of Charles Sidor, the commander of the Hlinka Guards. Both experiments were naturally doomed to failure; for, while on the one hand they were not backed by the sympathy of the Slovak people, on the other hand they were made without regard to the international balance of forces. For in the interim M. Tiso, the Slovak Premier who had been dismissed from office, entered into communication with the leading factors of the German Imperial Government, who still continued to acknowledge him as the head of the legitimate Slovak Government. It was then already quite manifest that the arbitrary policy pursued by Prague had failed, and that the lords of the Hradsin would be compelled to bow before the accomplished facts and to take cognizance of Slovakia's independence.

And that is what actually happened. The great turn of affairs ensued in Prague; the Powers accepted the inevitable consequences, and President Hacha and Foreign Minister Chalkovsky went to Berlin, where they signed the historical document which subjected Bohemia and Moravia to the protectorate of Germany. We see then that after a brief independent existence of twenty years these two provinces returned to the body of the Empire in the framework of which — though under changing circumstances and in divergent historical conditions — they had lived for many centuries. This event is of quite exceptional importance also for Hungary, for in accepting the protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia which had been offered to it, the German Empire adopted the historical principle expressed most

plastically in the St. Stephen State-idea which derives its irresistible force from the unalterable postulates of ten centuries of possession. It is in this connection too that we find a convergence of the ethnic principle with the great postulate of the right of self-determination, a combination of principles which has always been the basis and the substance of Hungary's revisionist policy.

The far-reaching self-government which the Bohemia of former days is to enjoy will surely prove sufficient to enable that country to preserve its ethnic peculiarities and to freely develop its culture, — a possibility which it itself was unwilling during twenty years of domination to ensure the oppressed peoples — among the latter in particular the more than 1.000.000 Magyars who had, against their will and without being consulted in the matter, been subjected by the Treaties of Versailles and Trianon to the yoke of slavery. And all that was done in the name of the right of self-determination of the peoples; and it is surely a classical instance of the irony of fate that this very sublime conception should have been the means of shattering the artificial structure botched up in 1919 in defiance of all ethnical rights and of the principle of national sovereignty.

The independent and self-governing Slovakia the external defence of which has been undertaken by the mighty German Empire, for a thousand years was an integral part of the Kingdom of St. Stephen. It is impossible that the ten centuries of symbiosis should not have impregnated the soul of the Slovak people with the fertilising elements of brotherly co-operation and friendly agreement. We are convinced that the affection and brotherly fellow-feeling with which the Hungarian nation regards the future of the Slovak people finds an echo in the mind of that people permeated with the consciousness that here in the Basin of the Carpathians the fate of the two peoples is made one by higher laws from the reaction of which neither people is able to escape. Not only economic and geopolitical, but also historical postulates contribute to shape the destiny of these nations — a statement

the truth of which is proved by ten centuries of symbiosis; and in like manner both peoples will in the future to experience the deep-seated logic and irrefutability of that truth.

With the falling to pieces of the Czecho-Slovak State the Ruthenian people became veritably stateless; and it was only a natural manifestation of their instinct of self-preservation that they should have appealed for help to Hungary, the country which had been their home for a thousand years. The Hungarian nation gladly grasped the hand stretched out in appeal, in order to be able once more to raise to the dignity of human beings and rescue from ruin the people to which it was bound by sentimental and historical ties which were in any case unbreakable.

Hungary has certainly been very considerably reinforced morally, politically and economically by these events. We must however stress the fact that we have not received anything new, merely recovering a part — a fragment — of that which had been ours previously for a thousand years and which twenty years ago was wrested from us in defiance of right, law and justice.

Országos Széchényi Könyvtár