

DANUBIAN REVIEW

(DANUBIAN NEWS)

A REVIEW DEVOTED TO RESEARCH INTO PROBLEMS OF THE
DANUBIAN BASIN

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MANAGING EDITOR

Vol. IX. No. 3.

August, 1941.

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POLITICAL, CULTURAL, AND ECONOMIC SITUATION OF SERBS IN HUNGARY

BY

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Before the Great War of 1914—1918 Serb propaganda not only worked in a disintegrating manner within the confines of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy; it also deafened the whole world with loud complaints the burden of which was that Hungary was oppressing her nationalities. The Hungarians, on the one hand because they knew they were acting within their rights, and on the other daily events showed how unfounded such complaints were, took no steps to refute those trumped-up accusations. The consequence was that certain circles in Western Europe which received their information about Central European affairs through anti-Hungarian channels, acquired a totally wrong impression of pre-War Hungary's nationality policy. *It was chiefly owing to this false propaganda that an area of 20,551 square kilometres of Hungarian territory was adjudged to Serbia by the Peace Edict of Trianon.*

In what follows we shall attempt to describe in an unprejudiced way what the political, cultural and economic situation of the Serbs in Hungary really was.

1. *The political situation.*

The bulk of the Serbs immigrated to Hungary at the end of the seventeenth century under the leadership of Patriarch Arzen Chernolyevitch III. The Serbs, who were treated as guests, in 1690 received from the Emperor-King Leopold I. a Royal Charter, which on 20th August 1691 was ratified by the Royal Hungarian Chancellery. This Charter endowed the Serbs with extensive religious and

political privileges; they were, for instance, exempted from paying taxes and tithes and from having to provide quarters for the army during military manoeuvres. Further civil rights were granted to the Serbs by Act XXVII passed by the Hungarian Parliament of 1790—1791, in terms of which they were recognized as full-fledged citizens with the right to acquire land and hold official positions. In a word, this Act of Parliament invested the Serbs with all the rights and privileges enjoyed by the Magyars, the staple element of the State. And Act XLIV of 1868 so generously acceded to the demands of Hungary's nationalities, the Serbs included, that it was unparalleled at the time in the legislation of the world.

That the Serbs were free and independent citizens of Hungary in every respect, and that they enjoyed full political rights, may be gathered from the work written by Ivan Skerlitz, the first and best known authority on the history of Serb literature. In his work entitled "A New History of Serb Literature" (*"Istoria Nove Srpske Knizevnosti"*, Belgrade, 1911) Skerlitz, writing of the Serbs of Southern Hungary, says: — "The Serb craftsmen and merchants settled everywhere in the country, from Zimony, which was rich in silver, right up as far as Imperial Vienna. It was they who became the exponents, the spreaders of Serb culture and the pioneers of Serb national enlightenment. It was they who established the first Serb schools, who were the first to organize Serb education, who published Serb books and subscribed to Serb newspapers... *The Serb inhabitants of the larger Hungarian towns were granted municipal autonomy with their own municipal corporations and courts of justice, and were free to live their own separate lives on a firm moral and national basis.* Their development progressed rapidly, both from an economic and a cultural point of view. In every town with Serb inhabitants and every large Serb village they had their own schools. The "*Ratio Educationis*" issued by Maria Theresa in 1770 reorganized their schools too, raising their teachers to the rank of masters (*magistri*) and providing for their training".

Skerlitz thus frankly admits that the Serbs from the Balkans came into European surroundings in Hungary and

that they were given civil rights within the framework of the Hungarian Constitution; furthermore that they were granted Serb administrative autonomy with Serb aldermen, which made them free to live their own national life. That in spite of this great political liberty they came into conflict with the Magyars, was due to two reasons. *The first was that the Habsburg dynasty played off the nationalities in Hungary, the Serbs included, against the Magyars; the other, that when Serbia was liberated from the Turkish yoke and regained her independence, Belgrade obtained leadership, that is to say, took over the direction of Serb policy from the Serbs of Hungary, and in order to realize Pan-Serb ambitions sent hundreds of agents to Hungary with instructions to sow the seeds of dissension among the Serbs in this country.*

2. Southern Hungary the Cradle of Serb Culture.

Even Serb historians admit that the cradle of Serb culture was rocked in Southern Hungary, and it is no exaggeration to say that the Serbs owe all their culture to Hungary. The magnitude of the cultural mission performed by Hungary in this respect will not be appreciated unless we draw a comparison between the level of civilization that obtained in Serbia and the cultural development of the Serbs living in Hungary.

For five hundred years the Balkan Serbs who remained under Turkish rule had no schools at all to speak of. *In that period of Turkish domination the Serbs of the Balkans were in a state of absolute illiteracy*, so much so that in 1815 there were only three elementary schools in the whole of liberated Serbia, and even in those schools the language of instruction was Old Slav, not Serbian. As late as 1827 hundreds of villages had not one school among them. Besides the priests and *kalugyars* (monks) scarcely one person in a thousand could read; and it was rare to find even a priest or a kalugyer who was able to write. In 1831 there was one single secondary school in the whole of Serbia — in Belgrade — but it was only a four-class school.

It was not until after the middle of the nineteenth

century that Serb education began to make progress; and then it was the Serbs of Southern Hungary that led the movement. It was Dositej Obradovitch, who had been a *kalugyer* in Southern Hungary and was the first Serb Minister of Education, who undertook the organization of Serb education. All that he did in Serbia in the field of education was accomplished in the spirit of Maria Theresa's *Ratio Educationis*; and of the first 78 Serb teachers appointed by him 68 were Serbs of Southern Hungary who had studied pedagogy at the Serb teachers' training college in Hungary.

As we see, the Serbs of Serbia were on a very low level of culture until the middle of the nineteenth century; in educational matters the Serbs of Southern Hungary, on the other hand, thanks to the measures instituted by the Hungarian Government and with its support, had reached a European level. Without the Serbs of Hungary the education of the Serbs of Serbia would have been inconceivable. This is proved by the following facts: —

1. In the Royal Charters issued on 21st August 1690 and 20th August 1691 *Leopold I. Emperor of Austria and King of Hungary expressly granted to the Serbs who had settled in Southern Hungary liberty to practice their religion and the right to elect the head of their own Church, the Patriarch.* Among his other rights the Patriarch was entitled to consecrate bishops, appoint parish priests, organize parishes and establish churches and monasteries. That he should have the wherewithal to live in a state befitting his position as head of the Church, the King later on made a donation of the 21.836 yokes of land belonging to the estate of Dálya to Arzen Chernolyevitch. Thus the Emperor-King Leopold I. not only permitted the development of Serb culture; he also provided the financial means required for that purpose. Full advantage was taken of this both by Arzen Chernolyevitch and by his successors. Among the Serb Patriarchs of the eighteenth century Paul Nenádovitch, who was the head of the Greek Oriental Church in Hungary from 1749 to 1768, was undoubtedly the most notable figure. The first Greek Oriental seminary for priests was established by him at Ujvidék. This institute was called the



"College of Priests". At Karlóca he opened a secondary — so-called "Latin" — school with a staff of Serb teachers. He naturally made provision also for the establishment of Serb elementary schools. At that time the Serb elementary schools were all denominational schools belonging to the Greek Oriental Church, and they were administered by that autonomous body. In type they were characteristically Greek Oriental denominational schools in which Serb religious books alone were used for reading. The only secular subject taught was arithmetic, and that was not taught in all of them. The teachers were not qualified men; the children were taught by the parish priest, the sexton or some tradesman or shopkeeper who by chance was able to read and write. The schools were maintained by the Serb parishes. In terms of the Royal Charter granted by Leopold ensuring the Serbs of Hungary autonomy in church matters they were entitled to maintain these independent denominational schools. The medium of instruction was the modern Serb language, but all the books were written in the Old Slav language of the Greek Oriental Church. For a considerable time these books were imported from Russia; they were therefore impregnated with the Russian spirit and spread Russian ideas. As elsewhere at that time, school attendance was not compulsory; nevertheless, by the middle of the eighteenth century the number of Serb schools in Southern Hungary was considerable.

Maria Theresa, Queen of Hungary, laid the foundations of modern Hungarian education, and at the same time reorganized the education of the Serbs in Hungary. As early as 1774 she issued a set of "instructions" in accordance with which the Greek Oriental Serb and Rumanian schools had to be reorganized. In these instructions it was laid down that a school must be established in every Serb village possessing a church and a manse. The secular authorities were enjoined to build new Serb denominational schools where there were none and rebuild properly those that had fallen into disrepair. The final law dealing with the reorganization of the Serb schools was promulgated in 1776. In spirit this law was in conformance with the principles contained in the "*Ratio Educationis*".

The Kingdom of Hungary, far from preventing the development of Serb culture, actually forced their own national schools upon the Serbs, even though a great number of them opposed that measure.

Further development was made possible by Act XXVII passed by the Hungarian Parliament of 1790—1791, in which the autonomy of the Serb Church was established and seats ensured the Bishops of the Greek Oriental Church in the Hungarian Upper House.

Act IX of 1868 re-affirmed the autonomy of the Greek Oriental Church in Hungary. In substance this autonomy meant that in religious matters the supreme authority was vested in an Assembly consisting of ecclesiastical and secular representatives elected by the Serb people themselves and meeting at Karlóca. The Church was to be administered in conformance with the resolutions passed by that Assembly, subject to their approval by the King and the Prime Minister of Hungary. *According to the Statute of Election approved by a Royal Decree issued on 26th May 1871, the Serb ecclesiastical Assembly was to consist of 50 secular and 25 ecclesiastical members.* But the Bench of Bishops considered it an insult that the ecclesiastical members of the Assembly should also be elected by the secular elements. A Royal Decree issued on 12th July 1912 redressed that grievance. It did away with the organization of the dioceses established in 1871, and re-instituted the relevant dispositions contained in the Law of 10th August 1868. This restored to the bishops and the Patriarch the possibility of exerting due influence on the constitution of the bodies and authorities acting in conjunction with them, so that the latter should indeed be the counsellors and supporters of the Bench of Bishops in its task of ecclesiastical administration.

The Assembly did not deal with political questions, but Serb public opinion was inclined to regard it as being of a national and political character, a sort of local Serb provincial Diet. It was the constant aim of the leaders of the Serb nationality parties to make the autonomy of the Greek Oriental Serb Church the bulwark of Serb nationality aspirations and political ambitions.

In terms of Act IX of 1868 Serb nationality education

was administered by a supreme educational board consisting of the Patriarch, the chief *rapporteur* on educational matters, and six members elected by the Assembly.

Elementary schooling was made compulsory, and all parents of Pravoslav (Greek Oriental) faith and Serb nationality were required to send their children between the ages of 6 and 12 either to a Serb denominational or to a Serb municipal school. The certificates issued by the Serb elementary denominational schools, where education was free, had the same validity as those issued by the State schools. *In the Serb denominational and municipal schools only teachers of Serb nationality and Greek Oriental faith who had obtained their diplomas in the Serb Pravoslav Teachers' Training College could be employed.* The teachers were elected by the school boards. For the training of elementary school teachers the Serbs of Hungary had three colleges, one in *Patrac*, one in *Zombor* and one in *Kirdlyváros*. Only girls who had successfully passed their examinations at one of the Serb higher-grade schools in *Pancsova*, *Ujvidék* or *Zombor* were admitted to the department for female teachers. Besides these teachers' training colleges, the Serb nationality had two Greek Oriental secondary schools enjoying autonomous rights.

Thanks to the extensive educational autonomy enjoyed by the Serbs of Hungary, *in Southern Hungary — the so-called Voivodina — alone they had, besides the schools mentioned above, 179 independent elementary schools* (which if we reckon only four classes to each, meant 716 elementary classes) *with 592 Serb teachers elected by themselves. Taking the whole of Hungary with the exception of Croatia-Slavonia, the Serbs, who numbered 461.516 souls, or 2.5% of the total population, had 58 municipal and 211 denominational — in all 269 — independent elementary schools with at least 1076 elementary classes.*

The funds for the upkeep of these schools were provided partly by compulsory contributions from the members of the Serb Greek Oriental Church, which were collected like government taxes, partly by numerous foundations and endowments, as well as by the gigantic incomes accruing from Church property. The Serb Greek Oriental

Church was one of the richest Churches in Hungary. *It owned 112.126 yokes of land, and the capital of the various foundations and endowments was reckoned to amount to 17.500.000 gold crowns.* The possession of this great wealth, against which the Hungarian State never raised any objections, made the development of Serb culture possible.

In the foregoing we have merely briefly outlined the progress made by the Serbs of Hungary in church and educational matters.

But that Hungary was the cradle of Serb culture as a whole and that this culture reached a high level, has been eloquently expressed by Sanoye Stanoyevitch, an eminent Serb historian who was professor in the Belgrade University, in the following pithy sentences: *"The Voivodina was the cradle of modern Serb enlightenment and culture. In the eighteenth century, while the Serbs of the areas under Turkish dominion had to fight hard for their very existence, with their rifles and knives always in their hands, the Serbs of the Voivodina, who had been set free from the yoke of the Turks, were in more favourable circumstances, and were able to develop their own economic and cultural life. Already then were established the first Serb elementary schools, the first Serb teachers' training college, theological college and the secondary school at Karlóca.* But long before this we find the first beginnings of Serb literature and science in the Voivodina. At the beginning of the eighteenth century George Brankovitch wrote a history of the Serb nation from the most ancient times up to his own day. Then in the course of the same century the production of Serb books in the Voivodina kept on increasing and extending to ever wider areas in the fields of literature and science. During that period Serb writers began to popularize literature and science in various sorts of almanachs, but it was Dositej Obranovitch (a son of the Voivodina) who revolutionized Serb national literature with his "Autobiography" and other works in which he demanded that literature and science should be made democratic. To further this end he chose the vernacular as the language of literature and science. Besides this, he was the first to justify Serb nationalism theoretically, and he was fortunate enough to

live to see the birth of the new Serb State, of which he became the first Minister of Education. It was in the Voivodina that a small literary coterie gathered round Patriarch Stephen Stratimirovitch; from the Voivodina came the men who drew up the rules of Serb spelling and reformed the Serb language; and it was in the Voivodina that the collectors of Serb peasant art and the most eminent representative of modern Serb literature, Vuk Karadzhevitch, lived. Already in 1862 the Serbs of the Voivodina formed the first Serb literary society, the "Matića", which served as a model for similar societies bearing the same name that were created later by every Slav nation and tribe. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the Serbs of the Voivodina were publishing a political newspaper in Ujvidék, which town also saw the first Serb calendar and the beginnings of literature for children. The first Serb theatre was established in the Voivodina at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It was short-lived; but in 1863 a permanent Serb theatre was opened at Ujvidék. The Serbs of the Voivodina were the first to create a Serb reading circle and Serb choral societies, and it was also in the Voivodina that the first Serb banking-houses were established. The first movements in Serb party politics known in the history of the Serb nation also took place among the Serbs of the Voivodina. It was in Nagybecskerek that the first Serb political party was formed; and it was there that the first Serb party programme was elaborated and accepted in 1869. There for the first time Serb science and literature began to be cultivated. The first reformer of the Serb language, *George Danishitch*, and the first scientific inquirer into the history of the Serb people, *Hilarion Ruvaratz*, were Serbs of the Voivodina. The first famous Serb writers of lyrics, *Ivan Jovanovitch*, and *George Jakshitch*, the first Serb dramatists, *Ivan Popovitch* and *George Trifkovitch*, and the first Serb writer of fiction, *Bogoliub Atanakovitch*, were also men of the Voivodina. Nay more, the first great Serb preachers, *Nicaphore Gruyitch* and *Theophane Zhivkovitch*, were born in that province. The cradle of Serb art was also rocked in the Voivodina. In the eighteenth century there lived here a famous Serb painter, *Zacharias Ortelin*, recognized today as the greatest of all Serb artists.

Two other Serb painters of renown, *Paja Joanovitch* and *Uros Preditch*, were Voivodinians. The best Serb actors and actresses were born in the Voivodina. It was the birth-place of Serb music (*Cornelius Stankovitch*); and the first Serb art exhibition was arranged in that Hungarian province."¹

With perfect candour Professor Stanoyevitch sums up the evidence of the higher level of culture obtaining among the Serbs of the Hungarian Voivodina in the following sentences.

„Thus it was in the Voivodina that the foundations of modern Serb culture, education and civilization were laid. It was there that the first Serb school and printing-press were established, that Serb science, literature and art in all their various branches first began to be cultivated. For a long time about the end of the nineteenth century Ujvidék was proudly called the "Serb Athens".

According to Professor Stanoyevitch, more notable by far than the cultural superiority of the Serbs of the Voivodina was their historical importance. He says: —

"But the greatest significance of the Voivodina in the history of the Serb nation lies in the fact that Serb nationalism, the Serb national idea, was born there. The Voivodina was typically representative of Serb nationalism... Serb nationalism came to life in the Voivodina, whence it spread to other areas inhabited by Serbs, permeating them... The reason why this was so was that in their new surroundings they (the Serbs of the Voivodina *Ed.*) were able to make progress in civilization and education... It was among the Serbs of Hungary that Serb nationalism became what it was recognized to be by European public opinion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries... We may frankly say that *nationalism and patriotism as they existed in the Voivodina stood high above all the rest of the territories inhabited by Serbs. For this reason nationalism and patriotism as they existed in the Voivodina came to be regarded as an example to be followed by the Serbs in other territories, as the prototypes of those virtues.*"

After these unbiassed and generous statements that go to the very root of the matter, it is perhaps superfluous to

stress the point that all this eloquently described Serb culture in Southern Hungary could never have developed to such an extent had not the Serbs who under the leadership of Patriarch Arzen Chernolyevitch III. fled to Hungary to escape the Turks and were hospitably received there, found themselves in an atmosphere that had been European for centuries, and had not the ancient soil of Hungary been a place where culture could take root, grow and flourish.

Professor Stanoyevitch was not the only person to state this truth. The question has been treated with similar enthusiasm by Ivan Skerlitz, professor of history, of whom mention has already been made. The following quotations from his works will serve to illustrate the point: — "The Serbs had also other schools in the eighteenth century. In 1726, thanks to the autonomy enjoyed by the Church, the first Latin Slovene school was opened in Karlóca. In 1740 the "*Duhovna Kollegia*", a Serb seminary for priests, was established in Ujvidék. In 1781 a regular Greek Oriental theological college opened in Karlóca. In 1812 the autonomous Serb Church established a seminary and a teachers' training college at Szentendre, in the vicinity of Buda, which in 1816 was transferred to Zombor, where it still exists."

The best means of propagating culture and also the most reliable criterion by which to judge the cultural work of a nation, are certainly its books. In this respect, too, we find particularly interesting and enlightening data in Professor Skerlitz's history of Serb literature.

"In 1771 the *Illyr Kancellaria* in Vienna permitted the Serbs to use *von Kurzbach's* printing-machine with Cyrillic letters. This printing-machine was bought by a Serb company in 1792 for 25 silver florins; in 1796, however, it became the property of the Hungarian University in Buda, from which date until 1830 almost every Serb book was printed by the Buda University Press. After 1830 we soon begin to find Serb printing-presses in Southern Hungary, one at Ujvidék in 1841, one at Szabadka in 1847, and others in that year at Ujvidék and Szeged."²

According to the figures given by Skerlitz the work done by Serb printing-presses in Hungary was as follows: During the whole of the eighteenth century all in all 220 Serb

books were published in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. From 1830 to 1850 — twenty years, — on the other hand, 1440 Serb books were published in Hungary. By 1881 there were no fewer than twelve bookshops dealing in Serb books. At that time there were already two very large Serb libraries in Hungary, one in Buda and one in Ujvidék. In 1826 the "*Matića Srbska*", a Serb literary and scientific society, was formed at Ujvidék. In 1833 the "Serb Literary Society" was created in Temesvár. The "*Danića*", the first literary magazine in the Serb language, appeared in *Ujvidék*. Serb theatrical performances were given in *Karlóca* in 1736, in *Versec* in 1794, in *Ujvidék* from 1802 to 1811, in *Pest* in 1813, in *Baja* and *Szeged* in 1815 and in *Temesvár* in 1823. From 1838 on there was a permanent Serb theatrical company that gave performances in various towns of Southern Hungary where Serbs lived, but chiefly in *Ujvidék* and *Pancsova*.

In conclusion it should be mentioned that the centre of the cultural life of the Serbs in the eighteenth century was *Pécs*, from which town it was transferred to Buda and thence in the latter part of the nineteenth century to Ujvidék, the "Serb Athens". It was only at the beginning of the twentieth century that it wandered to Belgrade, Ujvidék then taking a second place, which it still retains.

Naturally it is absurd to speak of the cultural or political oppression of the Serbs in a region where the whole of Serb culture was born and flourished.

3. FAVOURABLE ECONOMIC SITUATION OF SERBS.

As regards their economic situation the Serbs of Hungary had no complaints — nor could they have had, for they were free to exploit their economic resources to the full. From the Balkans they brought with them an aptitude for commerce which here in their new home they were able to take every advantage of. Not only were they the most active and capable dealers in cattle; they were also the agents between Hungary and the Balkans, for most of them spoke all the Balkan languages, Greek, Bulgarian and even Turkish. *In the South of Hungary they acquired possession of much land, buying the estates of Magyars who had died without*

heirs, and in this way the Serb agricultural classes, too, very soon found themselves in excellent economic circumstances.

The Serb merchants and craftsmen settled mostly in the towns, where they grew rich rapidly. It was from their ranks that the Serb middle-class arose in which Serb culture had its roots. Their wealth gave them opportunities of acquiring culture; their sons were educated in Vienna, Budapest and Berlin, and on their return became the leaders of the Serb national movement and propagators of Serb culture. The Serb merchants and craftsmen subscribed to Serb newspapers and became members of Serb literary societies, which they generously subsidized. When the land in the frontier marches was parcelled out, the Serbs received large tracts as communal estates, thanks to which theirs were the richest villages in Hungary.

According to the Hungarian statistics compiled in 1910, though amounting to no more than 2. % of the entire population of Hungary, they were in possession of 13.3 % of the holdings not exceeding 5 yokes in extent, 15.7 % of those over 5 but not exceeding 10, 16.3 % of those over 10 but not exceeding 20, and 11.8 % of those over 20 but not exceeding 30. The percentage was even higher in the case of estates from 50 to 100 yokes in extent and it reached 5.4 % in that of estates of 100 to 1000 yokes.

On the other hand the Serbs in proportion to their numbers paid only from 3 to 5 per cent. of the taxes, while the Magyars who formed 54.5 % of the entire population of the country and owned 59.9 % of the land, paid 61.1 % of the taxes on land.

That the Serbs of Hungary were wealthy and free to make the most of their economic advantages is proved by the fact that from decade to decade an ever-increasing number of Serb banking-houses were founded. *The first two Serb banks were established between 1871 and 1890. In the decade 1891 to 1900 four others sprang up, eighteen more were founded between 1900 and 1910, and six in the next five years ending in 1915. By that year thirty Serb banks had been established with an aggregate capital of 8.557.000 gold crowns.*

Even these meagre data taken at random from the statistics dealing with the economic life of the Serbs of Hungary, are sufficient proof that they were wealthy and prosperous and had no cause of complaint against the Magyars.

During the 200 years of their sojourn in Hungary the immigrant Serbs were treated as brethren by the Magyars, to whom they owe everything in the spheres of politics, culture and economy.

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