

THE POLITICAL, CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC SITUATION OF THE MAGYARS IN YUGOSLAVIA

BY

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For more than 200 years the Serbs had a home in Hungary, where they lived in comfort, grew wealthy, preserved their national traits, their language, their religion, and were able to develop their culture freely, a home whence they could assist their brethren labouring under the Turkish yoke and spread their culture, highly developed in Hungary's western atmosphere, to their kin in the Balkans. For all this the thanks was that they fostered pan-Serb irredentism in Hungary, and when this pan-Serb dream was realized and Yugoslavia was created, they started a most ruthless campaign of extermination against the Magyars who had come under their rule. The most violent acts of terror, the most cruel instances of persecution, took place in the southern districts wrested from Hungary (the Voivodina and the lands around the river Mura), regions where culture was on an extremely high level. The Magyars and Germans who together were in the majority, had either to be driven out or ruined, in order that the Serbs should gain sole possession of what for a thousand years had been Hungarian. To achieve their ends they deprived the Magyars of their political rights, cut them off from their economic resources, and destroyed their culture. The Serbs, who had been treated with hospitality and given every material, moral and cultural support, turned on their hosts and paid for the many benefits received with base ingratitude. The way the Magyars were harassed for 22 years was wholly opposed, not only to the principles of humane behaviour, but also to the international treaties. It was, for instance, a flouting of the treaty for the protection of the minorities handed over to the S. H. S. State which was signed on 10th September 1919 at Saint Germain-en-

Laye and in which the Serb State undertook to recognize the provisions contained in Articles 2—8 thereof as constitutional laws to which no law, ordinance or official measure should run contrary and against which no law, ordinance or official measure should prevail. This international treaty concluded by the S. H. S. State with the Allied and Associated Powers, with its own allies that is to say, was never respected; on the contrary, all its provisions were flagrantly violated. That minority treaty had guaranteed equality of civil rights to the national minorities in the S. H. S. State, pronouncing that all citizens of that country were equal in the eyes of the law and would be equally protected by the authorities, and that the minorities would enjoy the right to free cultural and economic development. In point of fact, however, the successive Governments of the S. H. S. State deprived the Magyars of the most elementary rights of man, destroyed their culture and ruined them economically.

1. *The political oppression of the Magyars.*

From the very first days of Serb rule people's lives were no longer safe. Their safety was threatened by the Secret Police, the Dobrovolyatzi (war volunteers) and the authorities imported from Serbia proper. It may be imagined what the life of the Magyar minority was like if we think that the men set in authority were renegade priests, teachers who had grown tired of their jobs, discharged army sergeants and the leaders of komitadji bands. Men who, far from having any knowledge of legal matters or the law, could barely read and write, were made parish magistrates. They were considered sufficiently qualified to administer the communities if they were Serbs, members of the Radical Party, or war volunteers. These sinister gangsters persecuted everything that was Magyar and were determined to acquire riches without work in the shortest possible time. To mention one instance among thousands of a similar nature, a criminal gang was discovered in Óbecse the members of which were police and gendarmerie officials, who made a practice of arresting rich citizens on the pretext that they were "politically unreliable" or "communists" and then releasing

them for sums ranging from 10.000 to 100.000 crowns. Those who refused to pay got 25 lashes. In the eyes of the Serbs every Magyar was suspicious, and this led to the arraignment, arrest and murder of thousands. Old fathers of families, heroes of the war, eminent politicians, were beaten and tortured. For evidence of this we have only to read the questions put in the Skupshtina by minority members, the complaints of the Croat deputies and the Yugoslav newspapers which before the Dictatorship, when they could write more freely, contained accounts daily of the inhuman cruelties perpetrated by the local administrative authorities. In every issue of Stephen Raditch's paper, the "Slobodni Dom" (Free Country), we find an enumeration of these recurring acts of Balkan cruelty. The Serb authorities went so far in this respect that three or four Bills dealing with the suppression of corruption were introduced in the Skupshtina, but they were never passed. To intimidate the Magyars thousands of political trials were instituted on trumped-up accusations, and many of the people arrested were beaten to death. One of the best remembered of these trials was that of Dr. George Vargha, Julius Ignâcz and their associates, who died as a result of the tortures inflicted on them while it was in process. People have not forgotten how the bodies of Magyars who were done to death at the police station in Szabadka were thrown out of the building in a heap, it being stated that those miserable men had committed suicide by jumping out of the window. Nor has it been forgotten that the Magyars who fell into the hands of the police in Temesvár and were confined in the cellar of the Hungaria Hotel never left that place alive. But enough of these horrors. They are well remembered by all. The employees of the Hungarian State in the severed areas were discharged without pensions and driven out of the country. As a rule they had to leave within 24 hours, which in most cases meant that they were forced to leave all their property — movable and immovable — behind them, which in turn meant their utter financial ruin.

Until 26th January 1922, i. e. for three years, the Magyars lived in a state of complete uncertainty as regards their legal rights. Ignoring the international treaties, the

Yugoslav executive power adopted the attitude that until the period for opting had expired, every Magyar was free to opt for Hungary and that therefore the right of Magyar citizens to claim Yugoslav citizenship could not be recognized. When that period had expired, the Serbs purposely delayed attending to the petitions of the Magyars who wished to opt in favour of Yugoslavia, in order to prevent them exercising their political rights. That this state of legal insecurity never ceased was evident after the assassination of the King, when masses of Magyars were expelled from Yugoslavia.

After the change of rule the Serbs suspended the right of assembly, the freedom of the Press and the autonomy of the parishes and counties. The officials of those formerly autonomous bodies were thenceforward appointed by the Government, and their Magyar officials were all dismissed on the ground that they were politically untrustworthy. To begin with the political organization of the Magyars was not permitted, but finally in February 1922 this ban was raised and in September the Hungarian Party was formed; its activities, however, were constantly disturbed by irresponsible elements (Dobrovolyatzi and Chetniks). A memorandum of their grievances was drawn up by the Magyars and submitted to Premier Pashitch on 9th August 1922. In it we read: —

"We deeply regret to state that most of the administrative authorities in the Voivodina do not act towards the organization of the Hungarian Party in the spirit of the Constitution.

"For, although the central administrative authorities have placed no difficulties in the way of the political organization of the Magyars, the local authorities in the Bácska and the Chief Sheriff of Törökkanizsa are taking preventive steps and using every means of pressure to suppress meetings convened for the purpose of forming a Hungarian Party.

"In support of this statement we submit the following facts:

"The administrative authorities in Szabadka did allow the Magyars to convene a meeting for the purpose of form-

ing a Hungarian Party, but they prevented the meeting, which was to have been held on 7th May from taking place.

"When the day fixed for the meeting was made public, the Lord Lieutenant of Szabadka sent for the committee and invoking the higher authorities told them he would be pleased if the constituent meeting of the Hungarian Party were postponed to a later date and that it should be held not in Szabadka but in some other town of the Voivodina, otherwise the authorities would be compelled to withdraw the permission issued for the meeting convened for the 7th May. The committee of the Party agreed to postpone the meeting until after the Hungaro-Serb frontier delimitation commission had finished its work, but is very unwilling to agree to the meeting not being held in Szabadka, since Szabadka lies in the centre of the districts of the Voivodina inhabited by Magyars.

"In Zombor the Under-Sheriff and the Mayor are using every means at their disposal to prevent the organization and activity of the Hungarian Party. Citizens who have agreed to help with the organization of the Party and have accepted work on the committee, have been threatened with expulsion, with the dismissal of their relations from public posts, with the confiscation of their houses, with a withdrawal of their passports and of the authorities' protection, and many of these threats have already been carried out. And when despite the difficulties made by the authorities the Hungarian Party was formed, although 25 armed policemen and 4 police officials were present, the authorities allowed war volunteers to insult and maltreat those who attended the meeting and smash the windows of the Magyars of Zombor. When the Hungarian Party complained, the answer was that they should be glad that no greater damage was done. Since the Party was formed its members have been constantly exposed to threats and even persecution on the part of the authorities.

"In Zenta the authorities took cognizance of the intention to hold a constituent meeting, but made it impossible to be held by notifying the conveners of the meeting shortly before it was due to begin that no one would be allowed to attend unless they voluntarily stated their intention to

join the army of the S. H. S. State. The meeting was held later on, but only after a complaint had been submitted to the Minister for Internal Affairs.

"In Magyarakanizsa it happened that in the presence of the head of the Police Serb citizens broke up the meeting and destroyed the minutes.

"When the Hungarian Party notified the Chief Sheriff of Törökkanizsa that a meeting would be held in Csóka, he replied that he would not allow any organization of the Magyars in his district unless they were prepared to guarantee that they would join the Democratic Party *en bloc*. As this guarantee was not forthcoming he stopped the meeting with a telephone message which said that it was the time of field-work, and that the Magyars should work and leave politics alone. If they should try to hold the meeting he would have them dispersed by the gendarmes."

In the April of 1924 the Pashitch-Pribitchevitch Government dissolved both the Hungarian and the German Parties. This Ordinance was revoked by the Davidovitch Government that same year. For the first time the Hungarian Party took part in the elections on 8th February 1925, but thanks to the violence of the Serbs did not succeed in obtaining any seats. What those elections were like may be gathered from the fact that most of the citizens of Magyar nationality who had a right to vote were not entered on the lists of electors, and that many of those whose names were registered could not vote because their names were cancelled later on. In Zenta alone 6000 electors, or almost all the Magyars who were entitled to vote, were deprived of the right to do so. A few days before the election the headquarters of the Hungarian Party were closed, no Party meetings were permitted, the official organ of the Party, the "Hirlap", was suppressed, and the Magyar tellers were either forced to resign or were put in gaol. These were the political rights enjoyed by the Magyars under Serb rule.

For the purpose of eliminating the nationalities, or rather of absorbing them, the Serbs did away with the county system in vogue in the old Austrian and Hungarian areas and divided the country into 33 new administrative units or provinces (Oblast). With this the administrative unity of the

counties forming the Voivodina was sacrificed. The districts along the river Tisza and the upper part of the Banate were attached to the province of Belgrade, the lower parts of the Banate to the province of Szemendria (Szmederovo), while a new Bácska province was formed of the greater part of the Bácska.

In consequence of the reign of terror it was not until 1927 that the Hungarian Party was able to achieve any results. On the 23rd of January of that year it won 10 seats at the Provincial Diet elections. It was also successful in obtaining 3 seats in the Skupshtina at the Parliamentary elections held on 11th September of the same year. It is true that the Magyars had to wait eight years for these meagre results and be content with 3 seats instead of the 12 or 13 to which their numerical strength would have entitled them.

In 1927 the autonomy of the Voivodina was restored, but it was in vain that the Magyars elected their own members of the parish councils; the Serb authorities always managed to find some means of preventing the formation of those autonomous bodies in the Magyar villages, and in many cases the higher Serb authorities cancelled the election of Magyar municipal officials. The election of Magyar parish clerks (notaries) was cancelled on the pretext that they could not speak the official language of the country. In the Zombor constituency, for instance, the 11 Magyar parish clerks who had been elected by the villages were deprived of their posts. Only six Magyar parish clerks were left in the Voivodina, and of these the last two were discharged at the beginning of 1929. -Autonomy was merely a sham, but even such as it was it did not last long. With one stroke of the pen all public rights and constitutional guarantees, the freedom of the Press, the autonomy of the provinces and parishes, the right of association and assembly, were wiped out by the Dictatorship proclaimed on 6th January 1929, and all political Parties were dissolved. Committees were appointed to manage the affairs of the villages, army men and civilians imported from Serbia proper were placed at the head of the municipal and provincial administration. On 3rd October 1929 the country

was divided into 9 Banates, an arrangement distinctly against the interests of the Magyars. The Voivodina (the Banate, Bácska and Baranya) was attached to the Danube Banate in order to reduce the Magyar plus German majority. In this Banate, in which the Serbs were now in the majority, the use of the Hungarian language was forbidden in all public offices, the few Magyar officials remaining were dismissed, Magyar pensioners and war cripples were cheated of their dues, no passports or visas for Hungary were issued, only 2 seats on the Banate Council were given to Magyars, although they would have been entitled to 17 or 19, and so on and so on.

The list of Magyar grievances, of the wrongs done to them, was endless. It would scarcely be possible to enumerate all the horrible and barbaric acts perpetrated against them in the field of politics by the Dictatorship. But to give our readers some notion of them we shall quote from the memorandum submitted on 15th April 1930 to the League of Nations by Dr. Juraj Krnyevitch, member of the Skupshtina and former secretary-general of the Raditch Party, in which, addressing himself to "the whole civilized world", he said: —

"Political rights have been cancelled. The safety of life and property has ceased. The mere possibility of a free expression of opinion no longer exists. The yoke of absolutism has been placed on every public institution from the political communities to the chambers of commerce, for the parish magistrates and the chairmen of the chambers of commerce are now appointed, directly or indirectly, by the Minister of the Interior. The censorship of the Press is so strict that the threat of suppression hangs like a sword of Damocles over all the newspapers, whose editors go in daily fear of imprisonment. Political criticism is unknown. The press cannot publish anything about politics except what is issued by the Press Department of the Prime Ministry. Economic news, Press reports and statistics are usually untrue. Political arrests are the order of the day, men being interned without a hearing or any legal proceedings. A new, special, drum-head court composed of Serbs has been established to deal with political offences, against the findings of which

there is no appeal. On one single day sentences aggregating 166 years' imprisonment were passed by this court. Matchek, the president of the Raditch Party, for instance, was confined in a musty, unwholesome prison which no civilized person could be expected to enter, and physical and moral pressure was brought to bear on him to induce him to undertake in politics the role of a traitor to his nation."

When the Dictatorship collapsed, a pseudo-Constitution was framed which utterly refused to recognize the minorities and their rights. The new Constitution expressly forbade the minorities to organize. The autonomy of the villages was restored in 1933, when a few Magyars managed to secure seats on the parish councils, but the towns had to wait for autonomy till 1934, and even then no elections were allowed. The political life of the Magyars was thus wholly paralyzed. In 1931 only the Government Party could enter the elections with a general list. On this Government Party list one renegade Magyar secured a seat. The Germans, too, only won a single seat. The rest of the nationalities, Rumanians, Albanians, Bulgarians, etc., did not succeed in winning one single seat, and the Magyars were left without any representation in the Senate.

At the elections in 1938 again, instead of 12 only one Magyar representative managed to get a seat in the Skupshtina, and this one Magyar was brought in by the Government. One single Magyar Senator was also appointed by the Government. It would have been utterly impossible for even one Magyar to obtain a seat in the Senate by election. The chosen leaders of the Magyar minority, Dr. Imre Várady, Dr. Leo Deák and others, took every opportunity of making representations about the crushing political oppression of the Magyars to the Yugoslav Government, but as a rule they were sent away with promises instead of redress. This continued all through the Serb era, and it is a characteristic fact that by 1939 none of the Magyar grievances had been redressed. They were brought up in the Skupshtina on 6th March 1939 by Gerard Fodor, the only Magyar member, who said: —

"The half million Magyars in Yugoslavia are today out off from all possibility of development; they have been

culturally repressed and ruined economically to such an extent that it is as if they had been sentenced to death. On countless occasions the leaders of the Magyar minority have laid its complaints and rightful demands before the leading politicians of this country, but so far nothing but fine promises have come of those efforts.

"One of the most conspicuous of our political grievances is that there are no Magyar officials on the staffs of the Magyar towns and villages. Our young men with university degrees cannot find suitable work, because all the positions have been filled with Slavs, many of whom do not possess the necessary qualifications and are bringing those once flourishing places to the brink of bankruptcy... As things stand today there is not one single Magyar vil'age notary in the country. The Magyars therefore beg the Royal Government to appoint young Magyars with the necessary qualifications to posts in public offices in a number proportionate to the numerical strength of the Magyar minority.

"Officials and employees of Magyar nationality are being gradually ousted from their posts in private business. I have received many letters from minority citizens complaining that owing to the pressure exerted by the authorities they have been dismissed on the pretext of nationalization.

"The Magyars also beg that no judges should be appointed in the courts in the Magyar areas except such as are able to speak minority languages well. The Magyar minority furthermore complains that it has been made extremely difficult even for those who lived in the territory of present-day Yugoslavia before 1910 and had acquired rights of domicile there, to obtain Yugoslav citizenship. Another grievance of the Magyar minority is that it is very difficult for persons of Magyar nationality to obtain passports.

"In the field of economic policy one of the major grievances of the Magyar minority is the Ordinance, directed solely against the national minorities, which limits the buying and selling of land and houses. Today we have reached a point where Magyar cannot sell to Magyar because the deed of transfer will not be endorsed if the

purchaser is a Magyar. The express object of the Ordinance is to deprive persons of Magyar nationality of the possibility of acquiring land or houses.

"Magyar agricultural labourers do not enjoy the advantages of the Land Reform and nowhere have the Serb authorities given so much as a site for a house to the landless Magyars. The farm servants, crofters and small holders of Magyar nationality were treated in the same way when the large estates were being divided. These poor people are now in a terrible state of destitution. I wish to draw the Government's special attention to the sad condition of those people, who have thus been thrust into the greatest misery.

"In the sphere of culture our most bitter complaint is against the educational policy of the Government. The Magyars beg the Government above all to revoke the various name-analysis decrees. Owing to the ruthless application of name-analysis, in Horgos, for instance, only 6 of the 17 classes in the schools are being taught in the Hungarian language, despite the fact that 9500 of the town's 11.000 inhabitants are of Magyar nationality. We also beg that religious instruction both in the elementary and the secondary schools should be imparted in Hungarian and not in Croat-Serbian, whether the pupils attend the Hungarian parallel departments or classes in which the official language of the country is the medium of instruction. Another wish of the Magyars is that the teachers of Magyar nationality who have been transferred to the State schools should be re-transferred to the so-called Hungarian parallel departments and that the Magyar teachers who have qualified lately should be appointed as soon as possible, so that the Hungarian classes which were closed because of an alleged dearth of teachers might be re-opened. This refers particularly to schools in outlying districts in which teaching has been discontinued for years.

"Yet another wish of the Magyars is that a permanent Hungarian theatre should be established with the same privileges as regard taxes as those enjoyed by the Serb theatres. And lastly we beg the Government to approve the statutes of the non-political Magyar cultural societies. This

was promised to us more than a year ago, but so far that promise has not been redeemed."

This speech made by Gerhard Fodor clearly exposes the tragical situation and the sufferings of the Magyars in the spheres of politics, culture and economy during the 22 years of Serb rule. If further proof is needed we may quote Milan Grol, the president of the Democratic Party, who made a speech in Ujvidék on 24th April 1940 at celebrations held in commemoration of Ljuba Davidovitch, former Premier and one-time president of the Party. Amongst other things M. Grol said: —

"Ljuba Davidovitch saw that the Serbs of the Voivodina were allowed to sing their own national songs during the Austro-Hungarian era . . .

"Apart from Southern Serbia what caused Davidovitch the greatest anxiety were the developments in the Voivodina. He realized that its administration in the hands of strange officials was bad. Those officials did not understand the new mixed surroundings in which they found themselves, and they executed the Land Reform badly, with dire consequences. In the rich soil of the Voivodina corruption flourished. This plant, corruption, was something new to the Voivodina.

"In the first golden years after the formation of the State there was bread enough and to spare for all, for those who worked and those who didn't. But in the years of the economic crisis the Voivodina suffered greatly, because it was expected to bear heavier burdens than the rest of the country. With the same sternness with which he inveighed against the bad administration of Southern Serbia, Ljuba Davidovitch branded the régime in the Voivodina."

Later on Grol said: —"

"We shall never forget the touching scenes witnessed on the occasion of Ljuba Davidovitch's visit to the Voivodina in 1935.

"The people could not greet him except from behind the bayonets of the police. Ljuba Davidovitch, that grey-haired politician, set out on an electioneering campaign from Ujvidék, visiting Óbecse, Zenta, Kanizsa, Szabadka and Bács-topolya and returning again to Ujvidék. All along this route the picture we saw was the same: among the represen-

tatives of the authorities men from Serbia were in the forefront. 'It doesn't matter what they do to me' — said Davidovitch — 'but I am ashamed of the country from which they came'... In the market-square of Zenta we saw nobody but policemen. In Szabadka, as well as in Zenta, a state of siege was proclaimed because of our arrival. When we were leaving Szabadka the long streets in the suburbs were filled with people, who, when the carriage with Davidovitch appeared, knelt down on the stones and wept to take leave of the grey-haired leader of Democracy. Davidovitch's eyes also filled with tears to see how the authorities in Southern Serbia and the Voivodina had lowered the prestige of Sumadija (the Serb Piemont of pre-war times Ed)."

From all this it may be gathered how crushing the political oppression of the Magyars in Yugoslavia was during the 22 years of Serb rule.

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