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BOHEMIA—THE SUBMERGED FRONT

BY STEPHEN BONSAI

WHEN in 1908 Austria-Hungary made a scrap of paper out of the Treaty of Berlin and annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina against the protest of its inhabitants the great initial wrong was perpetrated. It is by studying the brutal situation thus created that we uncover the immediate sources of the great conflict and, what is more helpful, we acquire light as to possible settlements and certainly some guidance as to those which are clearly impossible. No settlement is to be thought of unless it removes all the causes and even the possible pretexts of a renewal of the struggle, at least all which are now visible. We must not only build up and energize the solemn agreements which covered the neutrality of Belgium, we must not only right the wrongs of the Poles and of the Irish, and the never-to-be-minimized wrongs of the Alsatians, but we must do justice to the Bohemians, who have fought and died for their rights without ceasing and without unseemly parley or compromise ever since the day now nearly three hundred years ago, when they were cheated out of them.

How serious is the danger and how near to the main question comes this lightly regarded side issue involving the future of Bohemia, is clearly demonstrated today by the fact that the only settlement of the Great War which now suggests itself as at all possible in Berlin and Vienna (and here at least not very enthusiastically) is the contriving of a Middle European Confederation with hegemony in Berlin, and founded upon the continued political and economic subjection of twelve million men who have fought as valiantly and whose rights and charters, long trodden underfoot, are as beyond question as are those of any of the other oppressed nationalities, with the details of whose fate, however, we of the western world are more familiar.

The lands of the ancient Bohemian crown occupy the northwest corner of Austria. Bohemia proper is over twenty thousand square miles in extent, with 7,000,000 inhabitants. To the east lies the Margravate of Moravia, with 8,500 square miles, and with about two and a half million inhabitants. Adjoining lies the duchy of Silesia, 2,000 square miles in extent, and a million inhabitants, overwhelmingly Bohemian in blood, tradition, language and aspirations. It is not a new thing that this harassed people should stand in the way of German expansion to the east, as they are doing today. For more than a thousand years their lands have been a bone of contention between Slav and Teuton. Since early in the fifth century, when the Bohemian kingdom was most probably established, hardly a generation has passed but that their national existence has been endangered and their homes given over to fire and sword at the hands of the German invaders. At the end of the Thirty Years' War, Bohemia was spoken of as a well-nigh uninhabited wilderness, and its revival from this low ebb to their present position of power is an indication of the vitality of a noble race.

It was in 1526 that the Czechs made their never-sufficiently-to-be-deplored blunder of electing the reigning Hapsburg of the day to be king of Bohemia. In 1618 the people revolted, but two years later, meeting with a decisive defeat at the battle on the White Mountain, they lost their independence. Since then, Bohemia has been governed as a conquered province and the authorities in Vienna have made but little concealment of their purpose to root out the Bohemian language and to settle the country with German colonies wherever possible.

In the very early days of the reign of Francis Joseph the Czechs of the crownlands formulated their demands, of which they had not abated one jot through nearly three hundred years of persecution; they insisted not only upon their rights to live as free individuals, but as a free people. Unfortunately, the young emperor decided that they must become Germans. This unsolved question, and one that is insoluble except in the right way, has been a thorn in the side of the Austrian Emperor ever since. The Bohemians have always been opposed to the Triple Alliance and to those close, almost vassal-like relations with Germany, which the Austrian-Germans and the Magyars for obviously selfish reasons favored. Nowhere was the full significance of the

great war more promptly appreciated than it was in Prague. Here the people knew it meant an attempt to enforce German supremacy in Europe if not in the whole world, and they also appreciated the full danger even of German failure if it brought about the compromise, which is now being subtly advanced, of a Middle European Empire, which meant for the Bohemians the loss of the little freedom they then enjoyed.

The destruction of Bohemian independence after the battle of the White Mountain was an illegal act never acquiesced in and simply carried out by the overwhelming weight of numbers. And so naturally enough today, the Bohemians are basing their demands for self-government and independence not merely upon the abstract right of all men to these precious things, but upon laws and covenants which have never been repealed or abrogated with their consent. Under the Austrian constitution of later years all nationalities were declared equal before the law and the throne. But this provision meant little, and by the *Ausgleich* of 1867, by which the Germans and the Magyars secured absolute dual control, it came to mean nothing at all.

A very few days before the outbreak of the Great War the last measure of Bohemian autonomy was destroyed. By one sweep of the pen the Emperor dissolved the so-called Council of the Kingdom, and subsequently an imperial commission was created to govern Bohemia. The members of this body, called upon to exercise autocratic powers, were aliens and outlanders in spirit or by heredity and generally in both.

One feels drawn towards the Bohemians for their idealistic point of view. They are perfectly familiar with the economic wrongs and the exactions which their country has suffered at the hands of the Austrians, but always subordinate these injuries to the threatened loss of the language and the nationality which they hold so dear. Again, one is struck by the enthusiastic loyalty of all Bohemians in this country to America and to American ideals. There are more than sixty Bohemian newspapers published among us, and for years past each one of them has carried in every issue a call upon all their readers to secure American citizenship as quickly as possible, and this they have done almost without exception.

It is, of course, the question of language and of nation-

ality upon which the Bohemians and the Slovaks, be it said to their credit, will admit of no compromise. How often I have heard them say in their meetings, both here and in their native land: "Yes, we have put up for centuries with unfair taxation which has taken away our lands and robbed us of our goods. We have given up our sons to fill their armies because we had no arms with which to resist and because we were always promised that they would not be used in a war or in a cause in which we did not believe. But our language, the words that we learned in childhood, which we drank in with our mothers' milk, which binds us for time and eternity to all we cherish and prize; no, you shall not take our language away; you shall not choke the expression of our souls."

At the outbreak of the war Bohemians were paying more than four hundred million crowns annually in taxes to Austria. The imposition of the war taxes has, of course, increased this tribute very largely. All, or very nearly all, this money is staying in Vienna and is used, in so far as it is used at all for purposes that can be named and recorded, to develop the Austrian Alpine lands which are largely unproductive. And in the meantime the clearest and most elementary needs of Bohemia are ignored or neglected. If they wish to have anything done, the unfortunate Bohemians needs must go down into their pockets and pay for the desired improvement with personal contributions. And still, in spite of all this unfair treatment, the Bohemians stand at the head of all the Austrian nationalities in the matter of education. Less than four per cent of their people are illiterate, while among the Magyars, who dominate the situation, and help to misrule them, the ratio of illiteracy reaches nearly forty per cent.

It is impossible to estimate even roughly the millions of crowns that this unfortunate people have been compelled to spend every year in private schools, by means of which they have sought and have succeeded in preserving their Bohemian children from Germanization.

I spent a week in Bohemia in 1915, and I think I came away from there with my saddest memories of the great catastrophe. Here indeed lies prostrate in stark misery a mourning nation. Her sons are scattered or dead, their leaders are in prison or in exile; her daughters mourn by the side of the freshly-turned graves. In Prague still stands

the Hradcany, the great castle of storied memories, but here today it houses the Magyar soldiers, and the great battlements which more than once proved the bulwark of Bohemian liberties, listen to the strange, unintelligible words that fall from the lips of the foreign soldiery. It seemed to me that the Hapsburgs do not trust even the Magyar overmuch. At guard-mount on this historic site every day at noon a thousand men would turn out, but not one in ten carried a rifle. Are they short of rifles or is it found that here, too, the Slovak spirit has crept in? To this and many other inquiries are found any but satisfying replies. Prague is a mourning city and a whispering gallery of most uncertain and intangible rumor.

The draft goes on automatically as ever in Bohemia, resulting here and there in blood-curdling massacres of unarmed men, women and children. It requires the presence here on the submerged front of such a large body of alien troops who, now that the pinch of the wasting war is being felt, could be utilized to such advantage in other quarters, that the *Statthalter* is reported to have expressed the opinion to Vienna that the draft gain was not worth the cost, especially in view of the fact that every recruit deserts to the enemy and joins his true colors on the Russian front whenever the bare possibility of doing so is presented. The whole land is garrisoned by Magyar and German soldiers and, latterly, detachments of the *Landwehr* from Prussia have been brought in to garrison practically all the Bohemian cities and towns. These men, together with the Magyars, as much by petty persecutions as by their cold-blooded murders have made themselves particularly obnoxious to the unarmed population; but as all men capable of bearing arms between the ages of eighteen and fifty-five are drafted to the front, there would seem at the present moment little chance of, and no utility at all in, an uprising.

Dr. Kramarzh, of the Austrian Parliament, the well-known historian and publicist, is still in jail at hard labor, his death sentence—on charges which were never made known to himself or to the world—having been commuted to fifteen years' imprisonment. Because news of the illegality of his trial excited deep and widespread indignation, the Austrian authorities have latterly favored drumhead court-martials, which leave no substantial record upon which an appeal to civilization and humanity can be based. Indeed,

since the Kramarzh case there has been only one large trial for treason. In this, six Bohemian bank managers are in jail undergoing preliminary investigation. They are charged with treason on the ground that they discouraged subscriptions to the war loans. Dr. Soukup, the most prominent Socialist deputy from Bohemia, has also been arrested, charged with treason. But as there was not a tittle of evidence against him, he was drafted into the army and sent to the front. This, it may be said without exaggeration, has been the fate, regardless of their age, or of their physical infirmities, of all the leading men in what the Austrians regard as the disaffected districts. In this way thousands have been killed at the front who never would have been sent there had it not been planned to put them out of the way in this expeditious and economical manner. But their spirit goes marching on. The severest penalties are being exacted of men who are charged with having surrendered to the Russians, whatever the circumstances attending the surrender may have been. Decrees of confiscation against the property of these men have been entered and their families, deprived of all means of livelihood, are turned out in the streets to beg. A great number of the minor political prisoners are reported from time to time in the German papers as having ended their own lives in prison. There is only too much reason to believe, from information that leaks through the news barriers, that these men died of hunger and of other forms of ill-treatment.

It is difficult to keep track of the scattered Bohemian military units, as the Austrian authorities throw into prison and confiscate all the property and the lands of the families involved, to the most remote degree of kinship. These men are fighting and dying anonymously in so far as this is possible. With the Russian army the Bohemian contingent is represented by at least two full divisions amounting to something over forty thousand men. These figures are at least four months old and there are undoubtedly now many more Bohemians in the army of the Russian Republic, as, whether from mere stupidity or with design, the old autocratic régime placed many obstacles in the way of the Bohemian recruit.

In the reconstituted Serbian army there are a very large number of Bohemians, many of them reserve officers who have been placed in command of the decimated Serbian

detachments. In the Serbian division that fought with the Russian army in Bessarabia it is of record that there were nearly two hundred Bohemian officers and about three thousand privates. In France the Bohemians form several battalions of the French Foreign Legion, and with these dare-devils they have carried the Bohemian lion-flag well to the front. There are many Bohemian volunteers with the Allies in Macedonia and several of the Canadian battalions, notably the 223rd and the 225th, are filled with them. These volunteers came largely from the United States, as there are few Bohemians in Canada, and the fact that they are permitted to carry along with the British colors the white and red flag of Bohemia has exerted a tremendous influence upon enlistments. As they sailed for their unknown destination, but surely "somewhere in France," large committees of their fellow citizens from Illinois and Iowa saw them off and received their solemn promise to carry the Bohemian flag in all honor until they planted it upon the topmost peak of the Hradcany Castle in Prague.

Since our entrance into the war the Bohemians and the Slovaks have gone very intelligently and industriously to work to furnish the United States military forces with as large a quota of men as possible, without awaiting the operation of the selective draft.

Even a civilian can understand the inconveniences and the paper-work difficulties which would result from a compliance with the very natural requests of the Bohemians to serve and fight shoulder to shoulder as a distinctive unit. Perhaps a way will yet be found to gratify them and to give a still greater impetus to their recruiting, as the capacity to fashion special weapons to secure special ends is always the forerunner of success in peace or in war. Even under the present system enthusiastic recruits are coming in. From Chicago quite recently four hundred and fifty Americans of Bohemian antecedents were transferred to Jefferson Barracks in a body. In these circumstances Captain Kenney, U. S. A., to whose intelligent efforts is due in no small measure the high recruiting record of Illinois, has been able to write as follows to Dr. Smetanka, Secretary of the Joint Recruiting Committee of the Bohemian National Alliance and of the Athletic Sokols: "The response your people have made to my appeal for fighting men has been extremely gratifying. I gladly bear witness to the fact that no class of

Americans has come forward to defend their country in time of war with better spirit than Americans of Bohemian birth and descent."

This is not saying that with a different policy better results could not be obtained. Men who have been fighting for more than three centuries for the ideals which, at least in a world sense, we have only so recently espoused are entitled to fight under the colors their fathers have placed so high. If such a generous and elastic policy could be adopted, a great many men would be reached who are not being reached now. Among the many fractions of the six hundred thousand Bohemians in this country, who will not be affected by the selective draft, there are thousands of trained soldiers who have served three years in the Bohemian infantry, which are the smartest regiments of this arm in the Austrian army. Many of them came out of the service as "non coms" and not a few as reserve officers. With a little limbering and brushing up this class of men could furnish several thousand excellent drill sergeants, and this, I take it, is the greatest need of our army at this moment.

I have the utmost confidence that this question of the Bohemian volunteers will be solved in the way that will prove the best for all concerned. If I should make a plea for exceptional treatment and special units for the Bohemians, it would be on the ground that among large classes of our people there is greatly lacking an appreciation of the spiritual kinship that has existed between our races since the days of Wycliffe and Huss. To men of their past and of their aspirations, it is very annoying to be regarded by some as non-conforming Germans and by others as a race of sedentary Gypsies.

The formal demands of the Czechs and the Slovaks are contained in the authoritative statement which was issued in Paris in September, 1915, by their joint national council. They demanded an independent Czecho-Slovak state, and an explicit approval and sanction of this demand was incorporated in the reply of the Entente Allies to the German request for possible peace terms which were secured through President Wilson's greatly misunderstood good offices. In a word, then, every member of the Entente Alliance at that time joined in a formal demand for the liberation of Czecho-Slovaks from foreign domination. Since our entrance into the war there has been no public expression of opinion, much

less any formal statement from official quarters on this phase of the situation, which is not only of great concern to our fellow citizens of Slavic tradition but which has such a vital bearing on the question of whether the next peace congress is to build on the fundamentals of justice and honor, or whether, again, the ideals of an awakened humanity are to be submerged in the archeology of the hazy diplomatic past. Should this happen, and only if this should happen, will the Middle-European empire be constituted.

The Slavs in America believe that their cause has the overwhelming support of their fellow-citizens, they have no fear of what the outcome will be, nor yet that their interests, so bound up with and inseparable from the peace of the world, shall be neglected.

There exists such complete confidence and trust between the Czechs and the Slovaks, brothers in blood and holders of the same high ideals, that the task of working out the details of their future common state, for the present left undiscussed, would seem to present no insuperable difficulties. A general understanding between them undoubtedly exists, to the effect that when the opportune moment comes the Slovaks will state what guarantees of self-government they may deem adequate, and that the Bohemians will agree to them in an unquestioning spirit.

While Russia remained an autocracy it was naturally thought inadvisable by the leaders of the Czecho-Slovak movement to demand that the future state, towards which Russia was contributing so generously and so powerfully, should be a republic. Since the revolution in Russia, however, through their newspapers I notice that the future form of government for which they are working in such a self-sacrificing spirit, is invariably spoken of by the Czechs and the Slovaks as having the republican form. It must not be overlooked, however, that there is nothing authoritative on this question as yet. And it is certain that the joint war council of the two submerged nationalities, which sits permanently in Paris, has not made an official pronouncement on the subject.

As far as my personal intercourse with these leaders extends and permits me to judge of their attitude, I should say that they have at heart, and are seeking, the substance and not the mere shallow forms of free institutions. The great majority of the Czechs and Slovaks undoubtedly dream

of a republic with access to the sea either through the South-Slavic state yet to be erected on the Adriatic, or through the instrumentality of President Wilson's plan whereby under "A right comity of arrangement no nation need be shut away from free access to the open paths of the world's commerce." But if, for international reasons, the Allies should decide in favor of a constitutional monarchy for the reconstituted kingdom of Bohemia, both the Bohemians and the Slovaks will readily acquiesce and give the expedient more than a fair trial. In this connection, it should be noted that Austrian diplomacy has recently revived very ancient subterfuges, and offers of autonomy, after the war, are being dangled in the face of the Bohemians as a bait or a bribe to secure a discontinuance of the present policy by which the Austrian military plans are so frequently obstructed.

It may be said here, and with all emphasis, that these tactics have no chance of success and that the Bohemians are resolved at this late day not to accept autonomy under the Hapsburgs. It may be, of course, that the terrific blows of the last twelve months and the powerless present condition of the Austro-Hungarian empire have not escaped the intelligence of its statesmen. It may be that the handwriting on the Hof-Burg wall is even legible to them. But, generally, it is considered that these proposals are made with the Machiavellian purpose of bringing discord into the councils of the two Slavic nations who are at present working with a common purpose towards a common end. The offer of autonomy, it will be noticed, does not include the Slovaks in northern Hungary. And while autonomy, if real and not merely paper, would mean a great improvement of conditions in Bohemia, to the Slovaks this adjustment, if accepted, would sound the death-knell of even their most moderate hopes.

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