

# CZECHOSLOVAKIA TO-DAY

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“WE are being forced against our will”, said a prominent Czech thinker to me in Prague the other day, “to recognize that we shall have to develop as a State of Nationalities and not as a National State”. It is only one round of the contest between the Czech racial chauvinism which was born with the Republic and the determination of its non-Czech subjects to secure cultural liberty that has just been decided by the entry of Germans and Slovaks into the new Cabinet.

The round was by no means as decisive as is commonly believed abroad. To assess its real importance, it is necessary to go back a little. The present situation in Czechoslovakia is the reverse of that commonly met with in older countries. Here far-sighted leaders find themselves unable to pursue freely the progressive policies which they realize to be essential, largely because of the unschooled, reactionary nationalism of the Czech masses. The Czechs, as most of their political opponents readily admit, have been gifted with statesmen of a calibre seldom met with in modern Europe. M. Benes (whether you like him or not) has a *flair* for foreign policy which helps him to keep his place in the forefront, despite the bitter hatred of which he is the object. First boomed unstintingly abroad, and then unduly depreciated, his stock of statesmanship is now taken at its true value, which is at least far above the average. The estimates of President Masaryk's prescience have never varied much. The political ability of M. Svehla, the Prime Minister, has shown itself in the skill with which he has effected the desired combination of parties after protracted negotiation, and is evidence of the shrewdness of the peasant stock from which he springs. These and many other Czech pioneers have a vitality and genius which seems to be rooted in the Revolution, for the younger generation shows no sign of developing anything more exceptional than reliable rule-of-thumb bureaucrats to serve the State.

Czechoslovakia has not been favoured beyond her needs. All the qualities of her statesmen are called for to keep the ship of state on her exceptionally difficult course. The start gained by racial hatred when unwilling Germans, Slovaks, Magyars and Ruthenians were forced willy-nilly into the new Republic in 1918 and remorselessly “put in their place” has never been retrieved. Far-

sighted political leaders long ago realized the hopelessness of the Czech dream of a highly centralized State of Czech or Czechized nationals—a dream which most of these leaders had themselves encouraged in revolutionary days, and for which Dr. Kramars and his National Democrats still fight with conviction. But Germans and Slovaks, composing the two important minorities, sank class and party differences in the racial emergency and, each in their national camp, stood together to defend their educational, language and general cultural freedom against the organized attempts of the Czech (particularly of the Czech bureaucracy), to destroy them in the “interests of Czechization.” The closing of German schools, the creation of artificial Czech minorities in purely German districts by introducing large numbers of Czech officials with their families, the use of land reform to “de-Germanize” and “Czechize” the land, the prohibition of the use of German signs by shops, banks and other non-official concerns, the flooding of Slovakia with Czech officials not by any means of the highest grade—these and a dozen other intolerant methods of procedure created bitterness for which the state now has to pay dearly. Most regrettable of all is the discrimination which was undoubtedly often shown to the disadvantage of Germans and Hungarians in the execution of the land reform, in itself an urgently desirable and entirely justifiable measure. Yet the Czech chauvinists were fore-ordained to lose the battle:—the population figures alone prove it. Out of some fourteen million subjects of the Republic, the Czechs number some six and a half millions—less than half. The balance is made up of three and a half million Germans, two million Slovaks, and one and a half million Poles, Ruthenians, Magyars and Jews.

Last year, when Czechoslovakia was ruled by a “Cabinet of Officials”, the question of agrarian duties became urgent. For the first time in the history of the state, the German bourgeois parties, in order to secure a high protective tariff on agricultural products, voted with the Government. This was the thin end of the wedge with which M. Svelha has now succeeded, after months of negotiation, in prising open the door leading to full inter-racial political co-operation. The final argument he used was “If you stay outside, I must seek my majority in the old direction—that of the Socialists and Czech National Socialists.” Class interests finally triumphed over racial interests, and the German and Czech agrarian and clerical parties united with the National Democrats of Dr. Kramars to form the Cabinet which the Slovak People’s Party (predominantly clerical) has now entered. For months the

Czech Right parties tried to oust Dr. Benes (Czech National Socialist), their bitter foe, but President Masaryk insisted on retaining the man who is the exponent of his own views in foreign affairs. Should Masaryk actually have refused to accept reelection to the office of President, as it is stated that he threatened to do in the event of Benes being driven out of office, in all probability an attempt would have been made to elect a cleric! The clerical parties are more reactionary than the agrarian, and therefore more opposed to the basic ideas of the Czechoslovak state as expounded by Masaryk and Benes. M. Svelha, himself an agrarian, succeeded in averting this danger. Benes is retained as Foreign Minister, although his old party is in opposition, but the campaign against him has not been finally abandoned. His main support is the Czech Legionaries, who, with their own subsidized newspapers and their own banks, form a powerful body of personal supporters for Benes. The majority of them will stand by him in or out of office; the minority incline to the Fascist movement headed by General Gajda. Some idea of the hatred and contempt in which the present "Masaryk-Benes state" is held by the Extreme Right (Fascists) may be gathered from Gajda's recent history. The moment that the late Chief of Staff was found guilty of treachery and espionage, the Czech Fascist Council showed their faith in him and their contempt for the courts by unanimously electing him as leader.

How long the present coalition will last, is uncertain. It is made up of so many mutually hostile groups that it appears to lack every element of permanence. As for the Opposition, it has not yet achieved even the semblance of unity. The German Social-Democrats are reluctant to combine with the Czech Socialists of either the "Democrat" or the "National" brand, because they still see in them the exponents of racial oppression in matters of schools and of the use of their native tongue which they experienced under the late (Left) Government, the inheritor of the revolutionary nationalism of 1919. Nevertheless, steps towards establishing a united Left Opposition have already been taken. It seems probable that a gradually developing co-operation in opposition will form a body more stable than that produced by the opportunism of the clericals and agrarians who are nourishing, not abandoning, antipathies temporarily kept out of sight. If this proves to be the case, the present Cabinet may before long be succeeded by an "inter-racial", moderate Left group.

If one looks solely at Czech and German, this development appears inevitable. When one considers Czech and Slovak, an

element of doubt creeps in. The Slovaks, held for generations in something like bondage by the Hungarians, are a largely backward peasant people to whom Democracy is little more than a word. Hungarians assert that they were not discontented under Magyar rule, and it is only fair to admit that to a large extent this is true. The high-handed way in which the Czechs have conferred "liberty" on their racial cousins, combined with assiduous Magyar irredentist propaganda, has produced great discontent with the present state of affairs. But freedom to speak and teach their own tongue has at least been conferred upon them; what they fear is the Free-thinking element among the Czechs, for they are devout Catholics. If the Czech Right parties have the good sense to concede their reasonable demands for complete school and religious freedom, and for the full autonomy promised them in the so-called "Treaty of Pittsburg", it will be many years before the Slovaks will be found in a democratic coalition.

Though a simple folk placing generally their affairs entirely in the hands of the priests, the Slovaks, curiously enough, have done better than the Germans, for they have come in on terms which go a long way towards satisfying their determination to secure autonomy. The Germans still complain bitterly of racial oppression, and their Ministers will have to fight within the Cabinet to secure such a degree of satisfaction as will assure their electoral supporters that they have not betrayed the German cause by joining the Government without having received a mandate to do so. But it is hard to imagine that they will secure much from a Government which comprises Dr. Kramars, that passionately sincere and *intransigent* exponent of extreme Czech nationalism.

It is in the urgent interests of the state that consolidation and internal peace should be secured through decentralization and the adoption of a federalist system. Economically, Czechoslovakia is suffering seriously from hostile tariff walls. Only because she is a richer country than Austria is so little heard about her economic difficulties. These are sufficiently serious for me to have been told by a very well-informed person in Prague—not a Czech—"You will not be allowed in any periodical in Great Britain even to hint at the existing difficulties." The root of the trouble is, of course, that, with Austria, Czechoslovakia was the manufacturer for a nation of 52 millions, and has now a nation of 14 millions only to supply. How bitterly must the great Czech leaders rue to-day their insistence in 1919 on the break-up of the economic unity of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy! This bond of economic suffering, together with that of democracy struggling to maintain

itself against the aggressive absolutism of neighbouring states, tends more and more to bring into harmony the policies of Czechoslovakia and that little Austrian Republic which she treated at first as a peril to her independence, but which more and more she is being forced to recognize as a fellow-sufferer (to a far greater degree than herself) from the earthquake of 1919. The inevitable complete Franco-German agreement will force Czechoslovakia to cultivate good relations with her great neighbour, Germany, who is her principal customer. The existence of the present reactionary régime in Hungary (whose subsidized Press has just greeted with typically vitriolic abuse the peaceful advances of Dr. Benes) is a standing threat to her frontiers.

The Czechoslovak state has within it the germs of consolidation. The economic interests of the Germans of Bohemia and Moravia have forced them to recognize that their future is bound up with the Czechoslovak state and not with the Reich. But they will never accept their present condition of second-class citizenship; and as long as the Czech feels with due cause that he is a better man than the German in the Czechoslovak state, so long will German irredenta flourish. The economic interests of the Slovaks draw them towards Hungary as much as those of the Germans bind them to the Czechs; but the Slovaks have tasted a degree of political liberty that the Hungarians refused them for centuries. Even the organ of Father Hlinka, the Slovak clerical and anti-Czech leader, has recently expressed horror at the very idea of ever again coming under the rule of those responsible for such a cynical mockery of democracy as the last Hungarian elections. If they have not yet buried the hatchet with Czechs, at least the grave has been dug.

Czechoslovakia is passing through a trying and bewildering period: But even though the life of the present Cabinet of the Right should be a short one, it has demonstrated at least the possibilities of racial union. Those who distrust absolutism and Fascism can be thankful that the Czechoslovak Republic, essentially democratic as it is, has every prospect of surviving in a Europe which, in the distress of its political *malaise*, is still inclined to experiment in quack dictatorship. The future belongs to that group of parties, of the Right or of the Left, which shows the greatest courage in sweeping away the barriers to consolidation created by national chauvinism. Under the pressure of external reactionary influences seeking the break-up of the State, the necessary reforms are bound to be effected.