

# CZECHO-SLOVAKIA'S NATIONALITY PROBLEMS

BY

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(Continued)

## *Common Grievances of All Nationalities*

All five non-Czech nationalities of the Czecho-Slovak State complain of the same grievances: the principal cause of the discontent and dissatisfaction of all five nationalities alike are the provisions of the Constitution (Charter) promulgated on February 29th., 1920, as Law No. 121 and of the constitutional enactments supplementing that Charter. This Constitution was framed and passed by the so-called "Revolutionary National Assembly", in which only the Czechs were represented by elected delegates — by those elected at the Austrian Reichsrat and Provincial Diet elections of 1911. The Germans, Magyars, Poles and Ruthenians, on the other hand, were not invited to send representatives to the Constituent Assembly; and even the "delegates" of the Slovaks were appointed by Government, not elected by the people, the "delegates" being with one or two exceptions selected from among the so-called "Czecho-Slovaks", i. e. from among those Slovaks who were ready unconditionally to obey the commands of Prague. Under these circumstances all the non-Czech nationalities alike are impelled to regard the Constitution as having been foisted on the country by force (octroi).

When framing the Czecho-Slovak Constitution the responsible authorities cynically forgot the promises made in Geneva by the Czecho-Slovak Peace Delegation in the Note dated May 20th., 1919, in which that Delegation undertook to put into practice the fundamental principles of Switzerland, at the same time simply ignoring the institutions in the field of nationality law incorporated in law long before the outbreak of the Great War by Austria (nationality section of provincial educational and agrarian boards, nationality election courts, etc.) and Hungary (Croatian autonomy, autonomy of Greek Oriental — Serbian and Rumanian — Churches=autonomy of Serbian and Rumanian nations) — the two countries so often and so virulently attacked and abused by Czech propaganda.

The Czecho-Slovak Constitution does not acknowledge the non-Czech nationalities as such; nor does it endow those

nationalities with any form of territorial self-government rights: it is based on extreme centralism — a system absolutely unjustifiable in a State which is so characteristically a "nationality" State. The administrative laws of 1920 and 1927 and the big counties or provinces (Bohemia, Moravia-Silesia, Slovakia and Ruthenia) established by those laws — which are not homogeneous "national", but heterogeneous "nationality" areas — also ensured merely a very limited selfgovernment, as may be seen most strikingly from the provisions of the laws in question in terms of which the discussion of political questions is precluded in principle from the meetings of the representative assemblies. One-third of the Members of those assemblies are appointed by Government, not elected by the inhabitants, the sections of the several nationalities who have remained loyal to their respective nations (particularly in the case of the Magyars) being consistently ignored. In its work of restricting the scope of local government Prague has adopted extreme measures; Law 122 of 1933 actually goes so far as to make the election of parish (village) magistrates and councils subject to the approval of the Ministry of the Interior.

Nor did the Czech authorities consider it necessary to incorporate word for word in the Constitution even the provisions of the Minority Treaty concluded at Saint-Germain-en-Laye between Czecho-Slovakia and the Principal Allied and Associated Powers; certain reservations being subjoined which leave the way open for putting into force through the medium of ordinary laws and ordinances legal rules diametrically opposed to the letter and spirit of the Minority Treaty. A circumstance characteristic of the procedure adopted by the Czechs is that the first sentence of Article 8. of the Minority Treaty, which ensures minority citizens, not only equality of rights, but also actual equality, was omitted altogether from the text of the Constitution.

What has been said above makes it quite clear that the Czecho-Slovak Constitution is not based on the principle of democracy so often stressed and employed as a catchword, by the Czechs, whose assertions are unfortunately still taken for gospel by certain persons in Western Europe; nor is that Constitution based on the principle of justice proclaimed by the solemn words of the introductory section of the Minority Treaty. Now as concerns the question of democracy in particular, that is not in force at all except perhaps within the settlement area of the Czech people; the non-Czech nationalities are not allowed to enjoy it. The members of these nationalities are regarded by the Czechs as "second-rate", "third-rate" or "fourth-rate" citizens and are not entitled to enjoy the liberty either which is the other chief pillar of the minority treaty. This fact may be seen from what follows:  
Law 50 of 1923 (the Defence of the Republic Act) introduced a

whole series of new political offences and threw tens of thousands of "nationality" citizens into prison. This Law, combined with the provisions of Law 124 of 1933 supplementing the same and with the Press Act (Law 124 of 1924), apart from introducing a ruthless practice of confiscation, veritably choked the "nationality" press. Not a day passes without the Censor confiscating one or other of the "nationality" organs. The political and social leaders of the non-Czech nationalities are watched and shadowed by the police, their correspondence and their telephones being also put under control.

Domiciliary visits and the searching of the pockets and the stripping of the bodies of persons crossing the frontiers are everyday occurrences. The Czecho-Slovak State has in its employ spies and informers controlling the movements and listening to the conversations of Czecho-Slovak citizens even in foreign countries. We know of cases in which mere attendance at foreign balls or residence in foreign student hostels sufficed to subject the "delinquents" to criminal procedure and in the case of minority citizens even resulted in the imprisonment of the persons thus charged. Even persons absolutely unconnected with political life are being constantly refused passports. No wonder that the members of the non-Czech minorities regard Czecho-Slovakia in the light of a prison, comparing the police rule prevailing there to the Metternich system which long ago embittered the lives of their great-grandfathers and also had Czechs as its most obsequious agents. The unceasing chicanery and the continual pin-pricks weigh like a nightmare on the nerve-racked minority citizens and have contributed in no small measure to aggravate the internal conditions of the country. To Prague every individual minority citizen is a suspect; not a single minority citizen is trusted; and they are all alike treated, not as friends, but as enemies, the natural psychical reaction of this treatment being that the minority citizens do not trust the State.

Another characteristic feature of the Czecho-Slovak system of nationality oppression — a feature differentiating that system from all those previously in force, not excluding even the system employed in the days of Russian Czarism — is the endeavour to undermine even the economic existence of the minority citizens. The methods used in carrying this endeavour into practice are as follows: the ignoring of the non-Czech nationalities when awarding public contracts or contracting for public works, the exclusion of the nationality districts from the enjoyment of the benefits of State investments, the preferential treatment of Czechs in connection with the carrying out of the land reform measure, the employment in the big administrative organisations of the State of a quota of minority citizens far below that postulated by their ratio of the population, the exclusion from public offices



of persons of non-Czech nationality or the ignoring of the claim to promotion of officials belonging to non-Czech nationalities, the fixing of pensions of smaller amounts for pensioners who were members of the Hungarian or Austrian public services, etc., etc. These methods were first employed as against the Magyars; later on, for the purposes of what the authorities were pleased to call "the de-industrialisation of Slovakia and Ruthenia", came the turn of the Slovaks and Ruthenians; while in the thirties the same methods were applied also to the Sudeta Germans and the Poles. As a consequence of this economic policy the manufacturing industry of Slovakia and Ruthenia was completely destroyed already in the first ten years after the establishment of the Republic, while in the second decade of the existence of Czecho-Slovakia the manufacturing industry of the Sudeta German area (in pre-War days the glory of the industry of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy) was also reduced to a deplorable condition.

(To be continued)

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