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THE LITTLE ENTENTE

By Eduard Beneš

THE new states which in Central Europe have taken the place of the Hapsburg monarchy owe their creation to the living will of the peoples who for centuries had been oppressed in Austro-Hungary, and who had in vain endeavored to secure within that state the necessary conditions for a free and full development of their economic and cultural life. The revolutionary activities of these peoples—whether of a military or diplomatic character, whether undertaken abroad, side by side with the Allies, or at home—were the clear expression of this will, which could only be acted upon successfully because the European War created the pre-conditions for a new adjustment of Europe and because the substitution of new independent states for the Austro-Hungarian monarchy was not only an act of historic justice but at the same time in the interests of Europe generally. The Danubian monarchy was the aider, abettor and tool of Hohenzollern imperialism. It was, moreover, by its very constitution, the outward expression of a German-Magyar system of violence and the living negation of those ideals which brought half Europe and America into the conflict. Its removal became a manifest necessity as an insurance against future dangers and in order to secure the triumph of the principles for which the war was fought.

The changes which have thus been made in Central Europe are, of course, greater than any which have taken place in other parts of the continent. An entire great state has been obliterated from the map of Europe, an ancient and mighty dynasty deprived of its power and dominion; frontiers of new states have been delimited, and with their creation there have been severed political ties and, above all, economic ties of no mean importance.

It is not surprising that there are people who regard with scepticism the capacity of the new states for independent existence and who have doubts regarding their future destiny. The question arises whether Europe has gained by this new adjustment of conditions at her very center. Has the dissolution of a great economic entity, with a vast network of arteries and communications, and its severance into various fractions isolated from each other by customs barriers, contributed to European

development? Has not the creation of new independent states sown in the very lap of Europe the seeds of fresh political conflicts, arising on the one hand from a desire to avenge the revolution in Austria and Hungary, and on the other hand from the impossibility of drawing exact ethnographical frontiers and from the fact that more or less considerable racial minorities had to be left in all the states concerned?

It is for the policy of the new Central European states to supply the answer to these questions and to demonstrate the capacity of the new constellation for existence.

Czechoslovakia and her leaders have been from the very outset conscious of the fact that it would be their task to convert into *positive, creative effort* that splendid determination for independent existence displayed so successfully by the whole nation in its work for the revolution; that they would have to consolidate the state within and secure it against dangers from without; that on the basis of the peace treaties they would have to arrive at just relations with all their neighbors and contribute, to the best of their powers and abilities, to the pacification and consolidation of a Europe unsettled by long years of warfare.

Such were, from the outset, the positive, fundamental principles determining the direction and the methods of Czechoslovakia's foreign policy. There were not lacking, of course, some moments of a negative character, brought on by the danger arising from a reaction against the peace treaties, from the economic difficulties prevailing throughout Central Europe and from the general political and economic chaos which succeeded the war.

All these dangers, and also the positive political aims above outlined, were common to all the nations which had been liberated from the Hapsburg yoke. Nothing was more natural than that there should come cooperation in the field of practical politics. The work of bringing about the dissolution of the Hapsburg monarchy had already been carried on with a certain degree of contact and mutual understanding. The memorable Congress of the Oppressed Nations of Austria-Hungary, held at Rome in the spring of 1918, is one of the striking proofs of this fact. At the Peace Conference, too, the liberated nations acted in unison, maintaining a common front against their enemies and pursuing a common fundamental aim.

The first stage of this common policy took a concrete form in the agreement concluded between Czechoslovakia and Jugo-

slavia on the 14th of September, 1920, which is in substance a *defensive convention* against the Hungarian menace. It is the product of long negotiations that had been carried on from the end of the year 1919.

Hungary had become the center of a reactionary monarchistic movement which, with the restoration of the Hapsburgs as its motto, aimed at overthrowing the new order of things in Central Europe and threatened the security of the young succession states—and with it, of course, the security of Europe as a whole. The aristocratic and military elements, together with the reactionary middle class, saw in the recall of the Hapsburg dynasty to the Hungarian throne a means of evading the consequences of the defeat they had suffered and the obligations arising from the treaties of peace. Their designs for a restoration were bound up with the hope for a renewal of the “integrity of the Kingdom of Hungary”—that is, the return to them of Slovakia, Transylvania and the Banat.

The Hapsburg menace became acute as early as August, 1919, when Archduke Josef Hapsburg seized the reins of power. Czechoslovakia at once sent a very emphatic note to the Peace Conference on the dangers of a Hapsburg restoration for Central European peace. The sequel to this step was the note of the Supreme Council of August 21st, announcing the opposition of the Allied states to a Hapsburg government in Hungary. The Archduke's designs were thus checked. Hapsburg propaganda, however, continued to do its work under the cloak of legitimacy and not even a fresh note sent by the Supreme Allied Council on February 10, 1920, was able to put an end to the plans which had been laid between Budapest and Hertenstein, the seat of ex-King Charles. The defensive Convention concluded between Czechoslovakia and Jugoslavia provided that these two states should mutually help each other in case of an unprovoked attack by Hungary. That convention, supplemented by the assurance on the part of Rumania, given on the occasion of the Bucharest negotiations between Take Jonescu and myself on September 19th, that Rumania acknowledged a similar obligation even though no formal treaty was as yet concluded (it was not signed till April 23, 1921), created a strong and permanent bulwark against the execution of the Hapsburg plans. It was against this bulwark that the attempts at a Hapsburg “putch” twice came to grief: the first time in April, 1921, and the second time in

September of the same year. The alliance of the three succession states for the purpose of defence against attacks from Hungary thus successfully passed a practical test and proved itself a true guardian of the dearly-bought liberty of the nations that had been freed from the Austro-Hungarian yoke.

This defensive character of the alliance between these three states—generally termed the “Little Entente”—does not, of course, exhaust its entire political significance. In the negotiations leading up to the defensive agreement it was clear that a common policy against Hungary must be merely part of a broader political conception. It was a question, *in concreto*, of establishing a Central European group which, while carrying out the work of its own consolidation, should aid the general task of reconstruction.

The task was conceived in a very real and practical sense and in the clear consciousness that it could not be accomplished at a stroke, but only step by step. The evolution of the Little Entente itself is a proof of this fact. In its first stage it was composed of Czechoslovakia and Jugoslavia alone and its aims were summed up in the defensive treaty against Hungary. Rumania was joined up with these two only by means of negotiations which took place among the statesmen of the three countries, and through a verbal acknowledgment that in the event of a fight against Magyar aggression there would be a strong community of interest. It was not until April 23, 1921, that a treaty was concluded between the three. The narrow, formal contents of the accord between the three Central European states was supplemented by an ever-growing political harmony in all that concerned the fundamental problems of Central Europe. Not only did there exist an identity of opinion as regards relations with Hungary—all three states desired to be on the very best terms with Hungary—but there was a general accord on the Central European problem as a whole, especially as regards the effort to restore the Hapsburg monarchy under the cloak of a “Danubian Federation.” And, what was most important of all, there was absolute unanimity as to the aims and methods of a common policy—a unanimity which bestowed on the Little Entente its European significance and enabled it to fulfil its general political mission.

To the second stage of the evolution of the Little Entente belongs the adjustment of its relations and the relations of its

constituent members with neighboring states, and the drawing in of several of those neighbors to the inner circle.

In this connection mention should be first made of the agreement arrived at between Italy and Jugoslavia in the Treaty of Rapallo. This really signified the gaining over of Italy to the Little Entente's policy of common defense against attempts at Hapsburg restoration—an agreement supplemented, after negotiations conducted by Count Sforza and myself in Rome at the beginning of February, 1921, by an understanding between Czechoslovakia and Italy.

A no less significant extension of the political circle of the Little Entente was the treaty concluded by Minister Skirmunt and myself at Prague on November 6, 1921, on behalf of Poland and Czechoslovakia respectively. That treaty definitively put an end to the unsettled relations existing between the two states as a result of the diplomatic controversies in respect to Teschen, and laid the foundations for peaceful neighborly existence and collaboration. Under the treaty the two states mutually recognized each other's territories as defined in the peace treaties and undertook, whenever necessary, to agree upon a common application of the terms of those treaties. They undertook mutually to observe neutrality and to settle disputes by arbitration.

The policy of friendly co-existence on the basis of a recognition of the peace treaties, neutrality in case of a conflict with third parties, and the settlement of disputes by arbitration made up, also, the substance of the treaty concluded with Austria on December 16th at Lany. This treaty did not make Austria a member of the Little Entente, but it signified an accord between the policy of Austria and that of the Little Entente.

There can be no doubt about the political meaning of the cooperation with the Little Entente of these three states. Central Europe ceases to be a scene of political chaos and is growing into a firm structure consolidated along the lines laid down by the peace treaties—a structure whose central point is the alliance formed by Czechoslovakia, Jugoslavia and Rumania.

It is true that there is one gap in the structure. Hungary still stands outside. She has excluded herself by virtue of her policy, directed as it is against the security of her neighbors. There is little doubt that this isolation cannot be permanent, and that Hungary too will one day take the place in this Central European peace block which is hers both politically and economically.

In her policy Czechoslovakia has already, more than once, displayed her good will in the direction of collaboration even with Hungary. She commenced economic negotiations with that country in March, 1921, and reopened them for a second time in June of the same year, but the attempts at a "putch" made by the Magyar Legitimists defeated these manifestations of goodwill. It depends on the future policy of Hungary, on her loyalty to the obligations she has undertaken, and on her attitude toward her neighbors, as to when it will be possible to fill up this gap in the Central European system of states.

The significance of the Little Entente for peace and consolidation would not, of course, have been fully grasped if that group had confined itself solely to its political programme and had not demonstrated its no less important economic aspect. The consultations which preceded and which accompanied the negotiations for political agreement among the states of the Little Entente and the states associated with them, contributed substantially to facilitating and accelerating agreement on economic matters as well. They went hand in hand with them, supplemented, extended and indeed practically evoked them.

Central Europe, which previous to the war formed an economic entity, naturally suffered economically on being split up into a series of states. The connection of this dissolution with the unfortunate post-war economic plight of the Central European states is, however, frequently exaggerated. No single economic territory was immune from the effects of the universal economic crisis. The economic programme embraced in the policy pursued by the Little Entente states took cognizance equally of both the universal and the special, or local, causes of the crisis. Their policy was directed towards eradicating those causes by means of economic agreements, collaboration and mutual help.

Following out this policy the states of Central Europe were able to abandon the primitive "compensation" or barter agreements for the direct exchange of commodities, and to proceed to a system of economic and trade conventions linking up all the states—a system which is continually being supplemented and extended. Czechoslovakia, in particular, as early as September 18, 1920, substituted for a previously existing "compensation" agreement with Jugoslavia a regular commercial treaty, and similar treaties followed with Rumania on April 23, 1921, with Italy on March 23rd, with Austria on May 4th and with Poland

on September 20th of the same year. The more general economic problems common to all the Central European states and issuing from a common past were solved with undeniable success at the economic conferences which took place at Rome (April 6th to June 15th) and at Porto Rosa (October 29th to November 25th). This policy of sympathetic economic cooperation also contributed substantially to prevent the economic crisis in Central Europe from attaining catastrophic dimensions, and to produce a gradual but none the less unmistakable consolidation. Austria alone continues to suffer under grievous difficulties, the alleviation of which does not lie within the powers of her Central European neighbors alone. They have, nevertheless, done their best to relieve her situation by economic cooperation and by direct help, such as the loan of five hundred million crowns advanced to her by Czechoslovakia.

The evolution of the Little Entente is manifestly not yet completed. Its third stage will doubtless consist of a deepening and extending of the foundations upon which it has grown up and a further strengthening of all the ties and connections already formed. The practical tests which it has successfully stood—for instance recently at Genoa—are adequate proof of its significance and confirm the correctness of its methods.

To speak today of a "Balkanized" Central Europe is mere distortion of facts. Central Europe has ceased to be a scene of disorder and confusion; organization has taken the place of chaos, and a new system of states has arisen whose mission it is to preserve the results of the revolution of 1918 for the peoples of the old Austro-Hungarian monarchy, to renew and to strengthen law and order on the basis of the peace treaties, and to contribute generally to the work of European pacification and consolidation. To the Little Entente is due the merit of having created this system; it is its center and driving force.