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THE BOHEMIAN QUESTION

BY

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Cresco, Iowa

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NOV 13 1917

Publication No. 1138
Reprinted from AMERICA'S RELATION TO THE WORLD CONFLICT
Vol. LXXII of THE ANNALS of the
AMERICAN ACADEMY OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCE
Philadelphia, July, 1917

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THE BOHEMIAN QUESTION

BY CHARLES PERGLER,

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The exit of Turkey from Europe is now a question of a short time. Russia is no more an autocracy, and henceforth will be a democratically governed country. Thus remains unsolved only one major international problem involving the rights of small nations, speaking of nations in the ethnical sense and as distinguished from states. The allied note to President Wilson demands the liberation of Italians, Slavs, Roumanians and Czecho-Slovaks from foreign domination. The Czechs and Slovaks ask for the reconstruction of an independent Bohemian-Slovak state. All this postulates the dissolution, or at least a very serious diminution, of Austria-Hungary.

The federalization of the Austro-Hungarian Empire has become impracticable, if not wholly impossible. The case of Switzerland is hardly in point. Mr. Toynbee defines nationality as a will to coöperate, and a nation as a group of men bound together by the immanence of this impulse in each individual. The Swiss have developed this will to coöperate, while in Austria it always has been unknown, and conditions are such that to hope even for its inception would be wholly utopian. Nor can we point to the United States of America as an example, because we are after all a nation formed by the free will of immigrants of various origins, and with an underlying basis of uniformity of outlook, uniformity of language, and uniformity of culture, furnished by the original settlers in this country who came from England.

Nationality is the modern state-forming force. To disregard it is to stand in the path of an ultimately irresistible force. The historical process of unification of various nationalities, which began with the German and Italian aspirations for a national state, ultimately will be consummated. If it is not completed now, the world is due for another convulsion within a relatively short time. When this consummation takes place, that Austrian territory inhabited by Italians will be joined to Italy, the Roumanians will be gathered in one state, there will come into being a Yougo-slav

(South-Slav) state, and Poland will be independent or autonomous. If Austria then remains in existence, the only nations left within it will be the Germans, the Magyars and the Czecho-Slovaks.

In this "small Austria" the Czechs and Slovaks would constitute a minority; the Germans and Magyars would again combine to dominate and oppress the Czecho-Slovaks. Austria even so mutilated would continue to be a source of strength to Germany, and would form a basis for another attempt to realize pan-German plans of middle Europe and the consequent conquest of the world. The internal conditions of such a state would necessarily be volcanic, and Austria would continue to be a menace to European peace. We should thus be confronted with a situation which President Wilson in his address to the Senate described as the ferment of spirit of whole populations fighting subtly and constantly for an opportunity to freely develop. To again paraphrase another of the President's statements, the world could not be at peace because its life would not be stable, because the will would be in rebellion, because there would not be tranquillity of spirit, because there would not be a sense of justice, of freedom and of right.

The Austrian question is the Turkish problem in another form. Austria can be no more federalized than European Turkey. To permit Austria to exist in any form when this war is concluded, is merely to delay the solution of a problem that will never down; and in the life of nations, as well as individuals, delay and procrastination, the tendency to postpone a final decision, are crimes for which penalties are sure to follow. We have seen what this penalty is: a war devastating civilized countries.

The suggestions made in certain quarters that a federal constitution in Austria be one of the conditions of peace shows the futility of the hopes to federalize Austria. Those knowing Austro-Hungarian conditions need not be convinced that the empire's ruling classes would never carry out such conditions in spirit, and perhaps not even in letter; the world would not go to war immediately to force Austria to comply with such a condition of peace, and thus the germs of a future war, brought about by our failure to see clearly now, would be permitted to exist.

A liberal Russia will be what Russia always claimed to have been: a protector of the small Slav nationalities. With Russia liberalized, the spirit of nationalism, which must not be confounded with chauvinism, will be intensified, and Russia will never again

look with equanimity upon the Asiatic oppression of Slovaks by the Magyars, to cite a single illustration. This again shows the necessity of a final solution, and the danger of compromise and temporizing.

The Czechs have proven the possibility of independence by their economic and cultural development. Economically and financially the Czech countries are the richest of the present Austrian "provinces," and when freed of oppressive taxation, discriminating in favor of financially "passive" Austrian lands, the independent Bohemian-Slovak state would be even richer. At the present time 62.7 per cent of the burden of Austrian taxation is borne by the Czech countries, while the rest of Austria carries only 37.3 per cent.

It should be emphasized that the economic strength of the new states would be reinforced by the undeveloped resources of Slovakia, the inhabitants of which form a part of the same ethnic group as the Bohemians, and desire to be joined with the Bohemians in one state. This presents no difficulty, since the Slovaks live in one part of the Hungarian kingdom, and are not scattered in isolated groups. For that matter, the world has about realized that in provoking the great war the Magyar oligarchy was *particeps criminis*; this war was not only a German war, but it was a Magyar war as well.

The Bohemian-Slovak state would thus consist of the lands of the crown of St. Wenceslaus, *viz.*, Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia and Slovakia, so that it would have a population of over twelve million inhabitants, and a territorial extent of fifty thousand English square miles, while Belgium has only eleven thousand, three hundred seventy-three square miles. Therefore it would not be a small state, being in fact eighth among twenty-two European states.

After all, the belief in the necessity of large states is largely a product of German mechanistic political philosophy and political economy. Already voices have arisen that certain states have become too large to manage. Mr. Louis D. Brandeis has shown that even under modern conditions certain business units can become so large as to be physically incapable of successful administration. May this not be equally true of states, especially polyethnic states?

If it be said that it is hard to reconstruct a state, or organize a new one, permit me to answer that it was not easy to organize the United States of America, and the period of experimentation under

the Articles of Confederation was full of trials and tribulations. For a long time it was a question whether in America we should have an aggregation of loose-jointed states, or whether a foundation for a real nation would be laid. Yet those architects of human society, to borrow an expression of Walter Lippmann, relative to Alexander Hamilton, who after our revolution held in their hands the destiny of this nation, did not shrink from undertaking the task.

It is objected occasionally that the new state would have no direct access to the sea. Access to the sea is important, but, with modern methods of communication, not as important as it was in the past. The sea after all is a means of communication; whether these means be the ocean, or the railroad, it makes little difference if the country is confronted by high tariffs. Again, the solution of this problem has been suggested by a number of writers, and by President Wilson in his address to the Senate, wherein he advocates the granting of economical rights of way to landlocked states in the following language:

So far as practicable, moreover, every great people now struggling toward a full development of its resources and of its powers should be assured a direct outlet to the great highways of the sea. Where this cannot be done by the cession of territory it can no doubt be done by the neutralization of direct rights of way under the general guarantee which will assure the peace itself. With a right comity of arrangement no nation need be shut away from free access to the open paths of the world's commerce.

It should also be remembered that a direct connection could be established with the new Yougo-slav state with its harbors on the Adriatic.

It is also true that the future Bohemian-Slovak state will have a German minority; but in central and eastern Europe hardly any state can be constructed without certain national minorities. In the present instance the minority is not as large as would seem on the basis of the false Austrian and Magyar statistics. But it will certainly be easier to safeguard the interests of a German and Magyar minority in a Bohemian-Slovak state than it would be to protect the rights of Bohemians and Slovaks in a deformed Austria, or to force Austria to become a federal state.

This question of national minorities will of course have to be worked out in detail, but judging from the way Bohemian cities and communes have handled the problem of German minority schools,

it may be safely predicted that there will be no oppression of German minorities, no more than there was during the centuries that Bohemia was an independent state.

A leading advocate of permanent peace recently suggested that the question of national minorities might be solved to a large degree by a system of judicious exchange of such minorities, or of various members thereof. This gentleman had in mind the situation in Macedonia, but the suggestion is worth considering in other connections. For instance, Vienna has a large number of Bohemians, and the question of the Bohemian minority in this city has always been quite acute. A large number of these people might be repatriated and their place taken by Germans living in Bohemia, who originally were colonists in any event. It goes without saying that such repatriation would have to be voluntary, but if once undertaken should be facilitated by the respective governments.

One cannot help remarking that prior to this war those now worrying over the possible oppression of a German minority by a majority of Czecho-Slovaks were little concerned about the oppression of the majority by the minority, which has been going on for centuries. It should also be noted that a policy of denationalization of other peoples is one peculiar almost wholly to the Germans. After all, there is such a thing as psychology of nations, and the Slavs have never been noted for attempts to impose their language upon other nationalities. Russia is not an exception to the rule, for her reactionary policies were largely due to the Junkers from Russian Baltic provinces and to the German bureaucracy.

The factors thus enumerated, the right of any nation to independence once its possibility is demonstrated, the necessity of dissolving Austria in the interests of permanent peace, I believe to be decisive of the Bohemian case.

I would not even fear the joining of purely German parts of Austria to the German Empire. This would carry the principle of nationality to its logical conclusion. It would perhaps strengthen Germany absolutely, but very seriously weaken her relatively. To the German Empire would be added a few million Germans, but it would be deprived of the support of a much larger number of Slavs, who are now being made use of to fight the battles of their bitterest enemy.

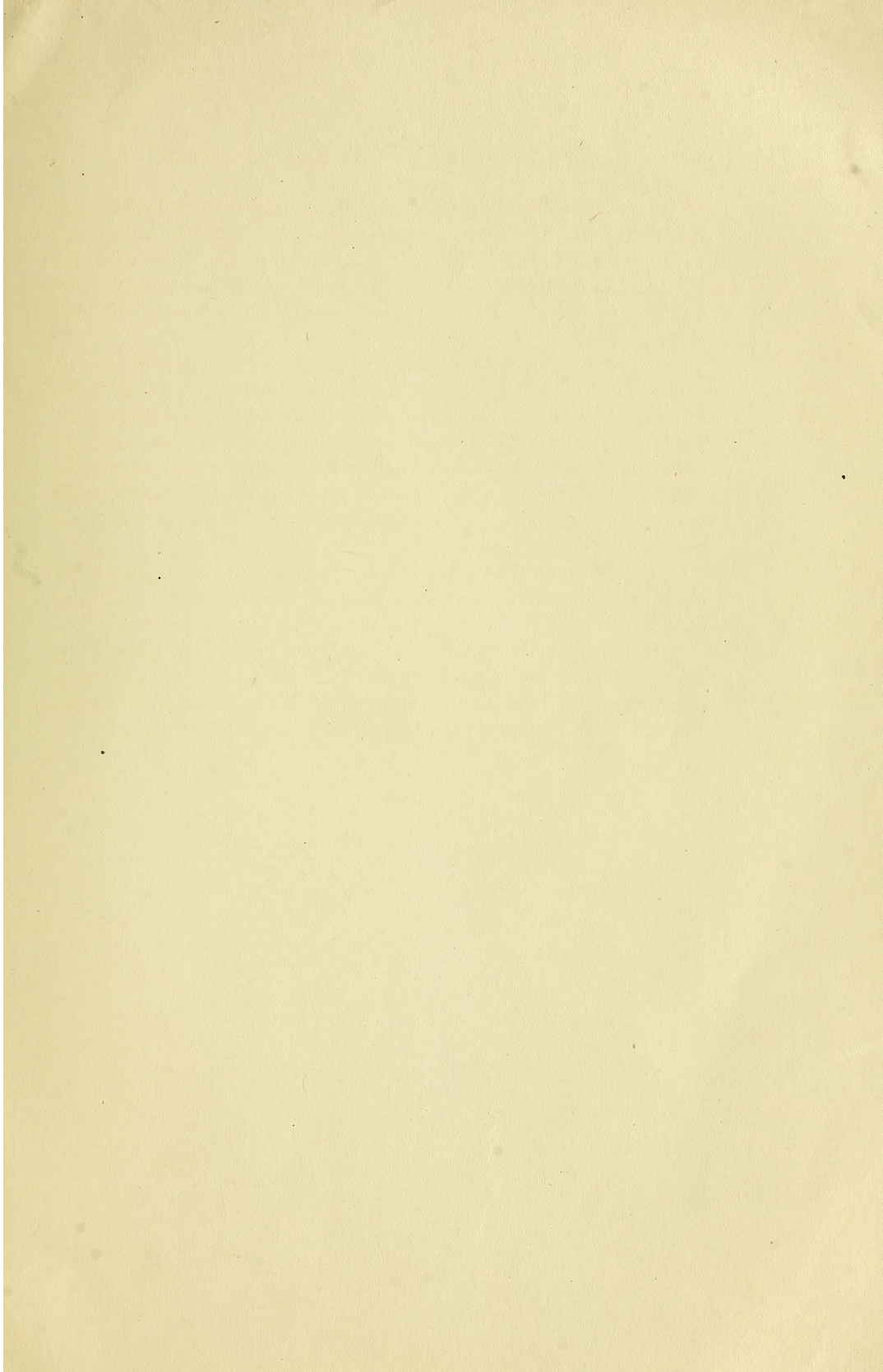
When we consider the Bohemian question in relation to the

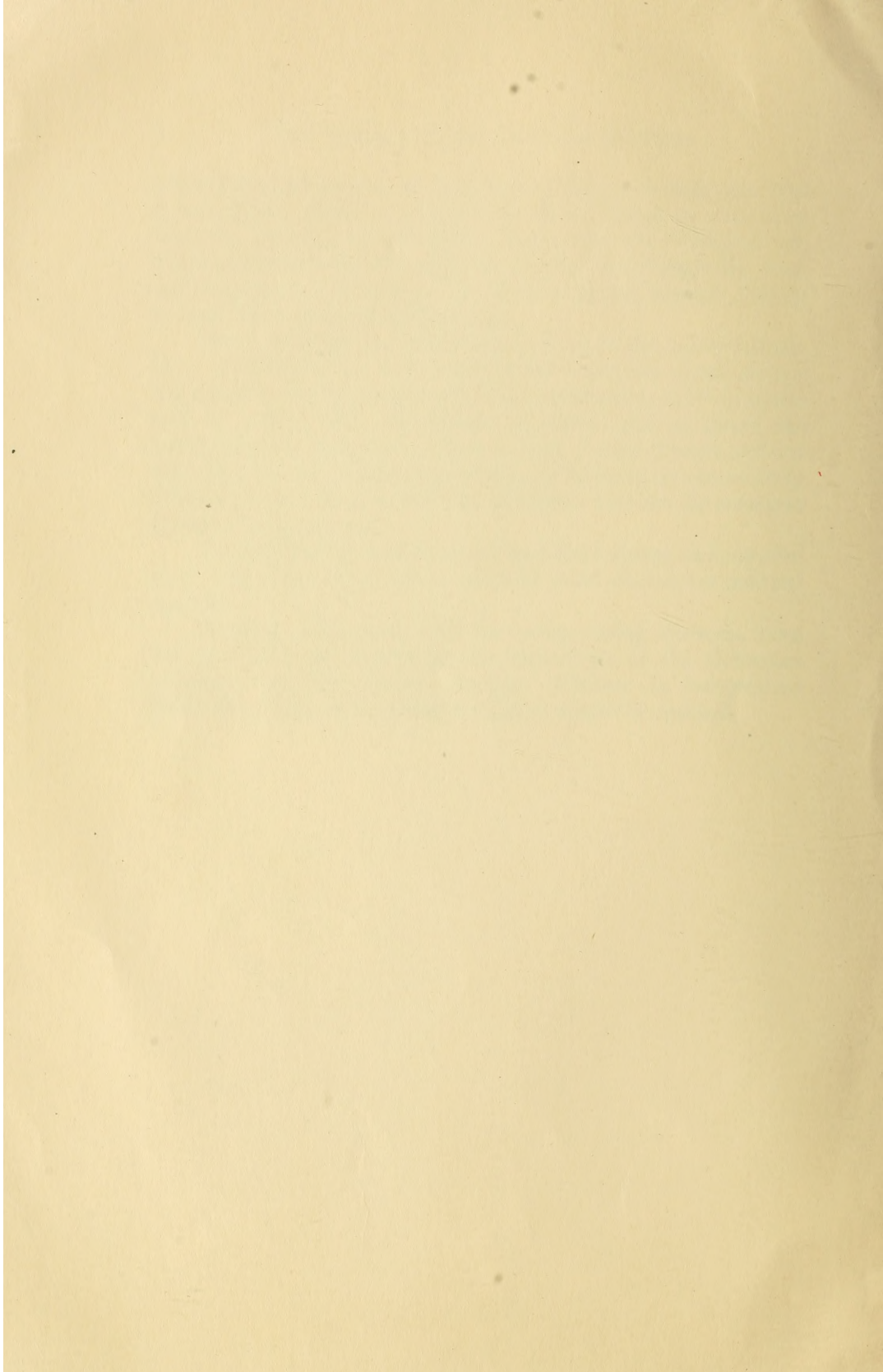
whole European problem of small nationalities, it is easily seen that it is simplicity itself, for a reconstruction of Europe in accordance with the principle of nationality means also the freeing of the French and Danes in Germany, the creation of a Yougo-slav state and emancipation of Poland. All these questions, whether difficult or easy, must be faced unflinchingly.

Let us not forget that the Czech question is also one of restoration. The Hapsburgs were called to the Bohemian throne by the free will of the representatives of the Bohemian state, and they undertook by solemn oath and pledges to protect and safeguard the independence of this state. The violation of such pledges and the deprivation of the Czechs of independence by force, do not do away with their legal rights, so that the Bohemian case has the strongest possible legal sanction.

The fact that the Czechs at one time had a strong and powerful state, well organized, is also a sufficient proof of inherent political capacity.

Bismarck maintained that the power ruling Bohemia rules Europe. This best illustrates the importance of the Bohemian question as an international problem. Without an independent Bohemian-Slovak state permanent peace cannot be realized.







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