

# THE STATE OF HUNGARY

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THE "Kingless Kingdom" of Hungary, where elections have been decreed for December,<sup>1</sup> is generally recognized to be an unfortunate country. If the interests of a people are to be identified with those of its rulers, this judgment would have to be revised. No régime in Europe has been more successful in turning national misfortune into personal profit and persuading the world to accept it at its own valuation than has that which dominates the lands of St. Stephen's Crown. The population is indeed unfortunate, but for reasons other than those generally accepted.

Hungary is usually presented to the world as a land of peace-loving, hardworking peasants, crushed by the Treaty of Trianon, yet harbouring no revengeful thoughts. It is a country which has been martyred by Bolshevism, say its official propagandists, yet which is now wisely ruled and happy in its parliamentary institutions—a country which, if it cannot lay claim to the happiness conferred by lack of history, enjoys the repose implied by its absence from the columns of the foreign press. Its only desire, apparently, is to be left alone by its neighbours, and eventually to return to the monarchy which it abandoned under pressure in 1920.

This is a cleverly drawn picture, but not one which is recognizable by students and friends of the Hungarian people. They see Hungary as a nation in shackles—in part forged, in part re-riveted by its present rulers. It appears to them as a country artificially maintained in a state of almost feudal mediaevalism in the interests of an oligarchy, with its press muzzled, its people forbidden freedom of speech and opinion—a country in which this oligarchy spends large sums in artificially nourishing dreams of revenge on its neighbours and in secret preparations for their realization. Far from appearing as the guardians of western liberties against the East, as the Magyar rulers love to pose, they seem to impartial observers to be holding in an eastern bondage an unfortunate subject population which, alone of central European peoples, fails to participate in the new liberties acquired by its neighbours.

I do not wish for one moment to minimise the injustice done to Hungary by the vindictive Treaty of Trianon. Desirable as it was that her non-Magyar subjects should be freed from compulsory allegiance to the Thousand Year Kingdom which in a thousand

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years had failed to assimilate them, it was not right or expedient that on all debatable points their wishes should have been made law. The boundaries of Hungary were drawn up with little regard to her national claims or to her economic needs. It may be doubted, however, whether the bulk of the Magyar population thus placed under alien rule has suffered more than those left to the tender mercies of the Magyar oligarchy at home.

In Czechoslovakia, Roumania and Yugoslavia, if he has been oppressed in the matter of language and education, the Magyar peasant has shared in the distribution of land which followed the break-up of unwieldy *latifundia*. In Hungary there has been nothing but a mockery of land reform; the adult peasant labours on the land of his lord from sunrise until sunset for the sum of tenpence per day, his wife and children for sixpence or sevenpence. Yet the Esterhazy family owns more than three-quarters of a million acres of land, of which Count Paul Esterhazy alone owns 300,000 acres! More than eight-and-a-half million acres—33 per cent. of all the arable land in Hungary—is owned by only 1,130 landowners. If you visit any Hungarian landowner, keep your hands thrust deep into your pockets, unless you wish to have them kissed by the first cringing peasant who realizes that you are a guest of his lord. Before every motor-car on the rough tracks that do duty for roads in Hungary, the peasant stands with bowed head, hat in hand. That is not yet the depths. An Englishman, who had occasion to motor a good deal with a member of the Hungarian aristocracy, told a friend of mine that he always knew when they had entered the family estates because, instead of standing hatless, the peasants regularly flung themselves flat in the road and kissed the wheel-tracks of the car as it passed.

Count Michael Karolyi, the well-meaning but unsuccessful President of the short-lived Hungarian Republic, is always spoken of by the present rulers as "The Traitor"—and justly, for did he not try to institute land reform, and thus betray what its rulers understand by "Hungary"—the interests of the oligarchy? Since Bolshevism ousted him and gave place in its turn to the White Terror, every precaution has been taken to fasten the yoke more firmly on the neck of the peasant. Though school attendance has decreased and school hours have been reduced, the number of teachers has been nearly doubled, the additional *personnel* having for its main task the teaching of Nationalism. In their free time, the smaller boys learn the elements of soldiering in "Pathfinder" organizations; from the ages of 14 to 21, by the law of 1923 youths are forced to join the "Levente" and to attend its drills. This

organization is supervised by officers of the old army, and is simply a militia disguised as a gymnastic association. Thus is the prohibition of military training set at naught. Where formerly a gendarmerie post of six men sufficed for six to ten villages, there is now one such post in every village. No wonder that 65 per cent of the national and municipal revenues of Hungary are spent on Government servants.

Liberty fares little better in the cities, where misery—invisible to casual visitors who admire the flamboyant beauty of the wealthy quarters—is so extreme that in Budapest alone there were recently sixteen suicides in one day. In the courts, prosecutions for speaking against the Regent, Admiral Horthy, are numerous, and savage sentences are inflicted. Perhaps the most useful weapon for stifling public opinion is the law making it an offence to say or write anything which might damage the name of the country abroad. It can be imagined, perhaps, to what an extent this is stretched to cover any utterance disagreeable to the ruling classes. The press is under special disabilities; the sale of any paper on the streets can be prohibited by a simple departmental order. In the same way, a paper can be suppressed for any length of time; there is no trial in the courts and no remedy.

To glance at three outstanding examples of the work of the law courts in the past twelve months may be instructive. Last year, Edmund Beniczky, a former Home Secretary, asserted that the Regent, Admiral Horthy, had been privy to the White Terrorist plot to murder Somogyi, a Socialist editor; he stated that, as Home Secretary, he himself had cognisance of the orders given by the Regent to prevent the punishment of the murderers. Finally, he declared that Count Bethlen also knew of these matters, and that his—Beniczky's—statements were absolutely true. He was sentenced to three years' penal servitude after a trial which took place for the most part *in camera*, but was released after a few months. Count Bethlen made no statement on the matter.

Last winter, after strong pressure had been exercised by the French, Prince Louis Windischgraetz, M. Nadossy, Count Bethlen's all-powerful Police Minister, and other Hungarian aristocrats were put on trial for the forgery of franc notes. They declared that they had acted from patriotic motives in the interests of "Hungary" (read "the oligarchy"). Count Bethlen testified at the trial to Prince Windischgraetz, saying; "I know him as a gentleman, and I know him to be incapable of having acted from sordid motives." Before the parliamentary Committee of Enquiry, Count Bethlen admitted that he had learned of the proposed

forgeries as early as 1921, and had given instructions that they were to be stopped. The sentences imposed on the forgers were amazingly light, and have just been reduced.

This summer, Rakosi and Weinberger, two Communist leaders, and their associates were put on trial. These two men had held office under the Communist régime in Hungary, and had returned from Russia to try to organize a new Hungarian Communist Party. Nothing worse than this was proved against them; they were sentenced to eight years' penal servitude apiece, double the sentences imposed on the franc forgery ringleaders. During the trial, prison doctors proved that the prisoners had been brutally beaten by the police to extract confessions; the judge brushed aside the admitted evidence as unimportant, saying to the defence in effect; "Well, all right, they were beaten. What of it? Get on with your case." This torture of prisoners is in fact an accepted thing in Hungary. As to the past horrors of the White Terror, these do not bear description. The White Terror murderers are unpunished, though they are all known, and one of the worst of them, who had nearly 200 persons including his own brother-in-law done to death in the wood of Orgovany, is standing as a candidate at these elections.

How is it that liberal opinion abroad knows so little of the real Hungary? Soon after the advent of the present régime, Count Bethlen received the sage advice; "Get the City and Wall Street behind you, and the British and American Press will be bound to follow." Every demand of international finance was complied with, and foreign capital attracted to the country. The direction of press propaganda in Great Britain and America was placed in skilful British hands. Every endeavour was made to propagate the legend of "Count Bethlen, Hungary's Strong Man", and to suggest that if he were upset, only Bolshevism would follow and invested capital would be lost. Hence, papers were told, it would be dangerous to publish anything unfavourable to his régime. The Hungarians saw to it that any British or American journalist coming to Budapest was carefully "nursed"; lavish hospitality, apparently spontaneous, was dispensed on a regular system, and the visitor shown just what it was desirable for him to see. Some visitors have even found very useful financial tips being tendered them. Resident Hungarian correspondents of British papers, if they were not already connected with the Hungarian Foreign Office, could always be dealt with by the methods applicable to all other Hungarian subjects. Determined and skilful attempts were made by British agents of the Hungarian Government to

discredit, with their papers in London and New York, all persons writing in Hungary who were not resident in Budapest and therefore largely immune from the combination of flattery and subtle threats employed there; such persons, said these agents, could be getting their information only from Hungarian emigrés, and were untrustworthy. Every article and every message, even the briefest, unfavourable to Hungary, were challenged openly or privately. The news agencies were supplied with abundant news, free of charge, direct from Budapest by the Hungarian Foreign Office. These are some of the methods by which Hungary has been—and is still being—made safe for autocracy.

What of the future? Count Bethlen has rushed through parliament a House of Magnates Act setting up an Upper Chamber, consolidating the power of the oligarchy, and conferring special privileges on the Hapsburg Archdukes, in defiance of the Hapsburg Dethronement Act of 1920. With the open ballot in 218 out of 240 constituencies, where the peasant has to declare on the hustings before the magistrate, the gendarmes and his "feudal lord" whether he is for or against the Government, the latter is sure of another obedient majority. Whether or no Count Bethlen's motive in suddenly ordering an election for no apparent reason is to try to restore the monarchy, the people of Hungary will have no chance of voicing their will at these farcical elections. How long they will remain mute and helpless under the heel of the dictator, it is impossible to say. Intolerable oppression provokes in time desperate and terrible remedies. Many efforts are made by newspapers and by individual journalists to get the truth known about Hungary, but the interest in that country is not great. This lightens the task of the propagandists, which is negative rather than positive, and directed mainly to keeping unfavourable news out of print. Liberal thinkers should bear in mind that all moral support afforded to "Hungary" as at present constituted, and every penny invested in the country, merely strengthen the grip of the oligarchy on the people. International finance should remember that in backing "Hungary" it is backing a mediaeval tyranny in a progressive Europe. That is not an investment, but a speculation.