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HUNGARY

CHAPTER I

THE OLD HUNGARY, A.D. 900-1919

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PAST. The occupation of Hungary by the Red Army, the overthrow of the system imposed on the country by Germany and the substitution for it of new and radically different elements are already a matter of history. But the future of Hungary is still obscure, and the problem of the Hungarian nation, an integral part of the European scene for over a thousand years, will be with us so long as Europe lasts. It is, therefore, more than ever necessary to understand the mentality and characteristics of this people, the economic as well as political position of Hungary in the Danubian basin and the reasons which underlie the antagonisms which separate the Magyars from their neighbours surrounding the Hungarian plain. For these purposes it is necessary, more perhaps than in the case of any other European people, to study their evolution in history; for they are pre-eminently the children of their own past. Without a knowledge of that past, it is impossible to understand the stages of the tragedy which has brought Hungary to its present plight. It is not, however, the only or the main object of this small book to trace the political development of Hungary; like all the handbooks in the present series, and like the *British Society for International Understanding* itself, it is concerned more with peoples than with governments. However cata-

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strophic the fortunes of war and politics, the very nature of a people and the essential conditions of their geography do not change. Who then are the Hungarian people? What is the nature of their country? How do they gain their livelihood? What is the social structure of the nation, its spiritual loyalties, the prevalent ideas in the minds of the people and the origins of them?

WHO ARE THE MAGYARS? The name of Hungary in its own language is Magyarország—Magyarland; and its story and its problems are to a quite peculiar degree those of the strange and interesting people who inhabit it and to whom it owes that name. The Magyars are not, by origin, Europeans in the ordinary sense of the term. Their remote ancestors were a primitive tribe, distantly related to the Finns. Finnish and its cousin Estonian, are the only languages spoken in Europe to-day which bear any likeness to Magyar, and the Magyars always feel a warm sympathy for the Finns, as their nearest relatives. The forefathers of the Magyars, however, lived in ancient times far eastward of the present Finland, on the eastern slopes of the Ural Mountains. Here they mingled with nomad tribes who were roaming the plains of Central Asia, and under their leadership they journeyed by gradual stages across South Russia and the Ukraine, driven ever westward by the pressure of other nomadic races from the East. At last, at the end of the ninth century—that is over 1000 years ago—they crossed the Carpathian Mountains and pitched their tents on the further side, in the land which their descendants still inhabit.

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THE MOUNTAIN-GIRDED PLAIN. The country in which they settled is a wide plain formed by the middle course of the Danube. The plain, with the inner slopes of the mountains which surround it, forms an area over 100,000 square miles in extent, and roughly circular in shape. In the west the open country is bounded by the Austrian Alps; in the south, by the mountains of Bosnia and Serbia; while the north and east are enclosed by the vast sweep of the Carpathians. Of these ranges, those of Austria and the Balkans are comparatively low and open—more ‘mountain systems’ than continuous ranges—and are able to support fairly large populations. These peoples—the Germans of Austria and the Slavs of the Balkans—were able to resist the invaders. Thus on these two sides the frontiers of ‘Hungary’, when they became established, did not extend beyond the foothills of the mountains. The main crest of the Carpathians, on the other hand, forms a wall broken by only a few passes. It is thus difficult to cross the mountains from north and east, while easy to approach them up the many valleys, nearly all of which converge on the central plain. Thus the Magyar invaders found it easy to conquer the sparse population of these highlands, and up to 1918 the frontiers of Hungary in the north and east ran along the central watershed of the Carpathians. Hungary thus included not only what, since 1918, has been the eastern half of Czechoslovakia (Slovakia and Ruthenia) but also in the east the much-disputed province of Transylvania, which after 1918 became Rumanian.

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THE AGE OF CONSOLIDATION. Hungarian history since the 'Conquest' falls into two sharply distinct periods, divided by the central date of 1526. The first period was one of consolidation and progress. At first the new arrivals had to fight hard for their existence and independence against the Germans, who organized against them the 'Eastern March' of Austria, the old name of which Hitler revived in 1938. They survived this struggle, however, and in A.D. 1000 became one of the European family of nations, when their great king, St Stephen, great-grandson of the original 'leader' Arpád, who had brought them into Hungary, adopted Latin Christianity for himself and his nation, receiving from Pope Sylvester II the famous Holy Crown of Hungary. St Stephen's descendants and successors, the Hungarian kings of the eleventh and succeeding centuries, gradually made good their position. The nation multiplied, losing as it did so (partly through inter-breeding with neighbouring peoples) some of its wild, nomadic characteristics. The Magyars ceased to live in tents and built towns, churches and monasteries. From their primitive life of nomadic stock-breeders they became settled agriculturalists. At the same time, the old social organization dissolved, gradually giving place to a new order which in many respects resembled that of all the European nations of the day, the English included. Round the king grew up an aristocracy of great nobles; at the other end of the scale, the peasants sank into bondage. The chief difference as compared with England was that the class of 'small nobles' or freemen were usually more successful in asserting their rights against the great

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oligarchs, so that the privileged class was larger. In consequence the class below them, the peasants, had a heavier burden to bear. Nevertheless, the nation flourished. During these centuries it ranked as a Great Power, preserving its independence against the German princes and intervening in Balkan affairs. The days of its great kings, Louis the Great (who also wore the Crown of Poland) and Matthias Corvinus, are remembered as the golden age of Hungarian history.

All this time, however, Hungary had to face a constant threat from invaders, pressing down from the east, along the same road taken centuries earlier by the Magyars themselves. The Tatars or Mongols devastated the country in the thirteenth century, wiping out a large part of its population. After them came the Osmanli or Ottoman Turks, who gradually conquered Asia Minor, Constantinople and the Balkan States. Against them the kings of Hungary waged almost constant defensive warfare from the fourteenth century onward, a struggle in which Hungary won the title of Shield and Bulwark of Christendom.

CONSEQUENCES OF THE TURKISH CONQUEST. This long blood-letting exhausted the Magyars and in 1526, at the famous battle of Mohács, in South Hungary, the Hungarian army was annihilated and its king perished. The victorious Turks now advanced and occupied all Central Hungary. For 150 years a Turkish Pasha ruled in Buda. In Transylvania native princes preserved a half-independence, while acknowledging the Sultan as their suzerain.

When this happened, the old native Árpád

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dynasty had already died out in the male line 200 years previously. When King Louis II perished at Mohács, the Archduke Ferdinand Habsburg of Austria claimed the succession to the throne both of Hungary and Bohemia, of which Louis had also been king. Although the part of Hungary over which the Habsburgs could rule was only a strip of its northern and western edge, the acquisition of it, with that of Bohemia, enabled them to build up their dominions into the greatest of the Continental Powers.

For almost exactly 400 years Hungary remained part of the Habsburg Monarchy. At the end of the seventeenth century, the old frontiers were recovered, the Turks being driven out and Transylvania reincorporated soon after. But the new Hungary was only a shadow of the old. The Turkish rule had afflicted half the country with a desolation the effects of which are still visible today. Moreover the Magyar population of the central plains, which had been directly under the Turks, had been largely wiped out; whereas the Turks had done no more than raid the Slovaks and Ruthenes of the north, the Germans of the western fringe, and Transylvania, with its mixed population in which Rumanians formed a large element. The numbers of non-Magyars in Hungary were further increased, after the expulsion of the Turks, by immigration from the south of Serb and Croat fugitives from Moslem rule, and by the colonization of the unoccupied land. For this purpose settlers were brought in from all over Europe; but most of them were Germans, coming from South Germany and called by the people—as their descen-

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dants still are—'Swabians'. Thus by the eighteenth century the Magyars were in a minority in Hungary, and formed the largest element only in the central plains: the surrounding parts of the kingdom were inhabited in majority by other peoples, Germans, Slovaks, Ruthenes, Rumanians, Serbs. In the south-west, the population of Croatia, which was not an integral part of Hungary, although the king of Hungary had since 1102 worn the Crown of Croatia, had moved northward, since the Turks retained their hold of the mountainous south. The new Croatia now reached up to its present frontier, the Drave river.

THE RULE OF THE HABSBURGS. Though the Habsburgs had to leave Hungary most of the forms of its constitution, at heart they regarded it as a rebellious and unsatisfactory province. Their real aim was to weld all their dominions into a single, centralized, unified monarchy, over which they were to rule absolutely. These efforts led to many rebellions by Hungarians; the leaders of these, Bocskay, Rákóczi (after whom the famous Rákóczi March is named) and others, are still the national heroes of Hungary. The last great conflict, in 1848-9, was led by Louis Kossuth. The Austrian Emperor, Franz Josef, only put the rising down with great difficulty and had to call on Russian help to do so. Thirteen of its leaders were shot at Arad. They are remembered as the martyrs of Arad', and the anniversary of their execution is kept as a day of national mourning. Kossuth's name is still the most famous in Hungary as symbolizing her eternal struggle for liberty and

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independence. It is also revered by the peasants, since it was through his efforts that they received their liberty in 1848, when the relics of the medieval serfdom were abolished.

Actually, the result of the 1848–9 conflict was more of a compromise than appeared at first. The emperor was unable to make his despotism permanent and, in 1867, had to make his peace with the Hungarian leaders. The Habsburg dominions were reorganized as ‘Austria-Hungary’, and in them, under the new ‘Dualist’ form of state, Hungary had full freedom in her internal affairs and an equal voice with Austria in matters of common interest to both (chiefly foreign policy and defence).

DISRUPTION OF THE DUAL MONARCHY. This arrangement lasted almost exactly 50 years, but it broke down at the end of that period, chiefly because of its failure to give satisfaction to the aspirations of the ‘nationalities’ in both Austria and Hungary: that is, to the peoples other than the Germans in Austria or the Magyars in Hungary. So far as Hungary was concerned, although half the population was now non-Magyar, the whole form and spirit of the state was rigidly Magyar. The other peoples were, as inferiors, treated with much galling contempt and intolerance, and abused as traitors if they resented this treatment. The only result was, of course, to make them really discontented and very soon many of them were regarding Hungary as a prison and waiting their chance to join their brothers in the new national states which were growing, or which the future promised out-

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side the frontiers of the Hungarian kingdom, namely, Serbia, Rumania or the Czecho-Slovak State, for which the Czechs were working in Austria. To this were added social discontents at conditions which, in some respects, were being modernized too quickly while in others they remained medieval. The end of the ancient Hungarian kingdom, in its old form, came after Austria-Hungary had fought the losing war of 1914–18. The national minorities received their freedom and set up their own states. Under the Treaty of the Trianon (1920), Hungary was reduced to the central core of the old kingdom. Of this the inhabitants were almost entirely Magyar. In area it was less than 30 % of the former territory, and included rather less than 35 % of what had been the kingdom's population. The remainder of the country was partitioned among the neighbouring states.

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