

MINORITY PROBLEMS
WITHIN THE
CARPATHIAN BASIN
(HISTORICAL
HUNGARY)
PRIOR TO 1920

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into the region and their nationalist
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This discussion is based on Oscar Jaszi's work entitled
THE EMERGENCE OF NATIONAL STATES AND THE QUESTION OF NATIONALITIES
published in 1912

In pre 19th century Hungary tension between the different ethnic groups and the constituent nation was unknown. People were divided by their religion, by social classes, not by ethnic differences. This can be seen for example in 16th and 17th century Transylvania. Here the ruling princes who were without exception Hungarian aristocrat would never engage in any Hungarianizing efforts, but they endeavoured to convert the Rumanians to Protestantism. To this end, it was prince George Rak6czi I. who established the first Rumanian language press in 1638, so that the peasants could read the Bible in their own language. In the course of time this press provided the means eventually developed into Rumanian national consciousness. This is acknowledged even by modern Rumanian historians. It is quite important that neither in peace-nor in times of war or social struggles did ethnic difference play any role at all.

In the 16th and 17th century's peasants revolts, Hungarian peasants and peasants of other ethnic groups fought side by side for their social rights. Xenopol, a rather chauvinistic Rumanian historian writes the following about the great peasants war lead by the Hungarian Dozsa in 1514: "This revolution had very sad results for the Rumanians. In the struggle the Rumanian nobility closed ranks with the Hungarian nobility, to which it was bound by class-interest. As a result the Rumanian nobility became Hungarianized, converted to Catholicism and forgot it's mother tongue," On the other hand common oppression brought the Hungarian and Rumanian peasantry closer to each other.

It was the same later in 1735 and 1737. Although this peasant revolts took place at different times, they all bore the same mark: Hungarian, Rumanian or Serbian peasants join forces against the nobility in order to realise some never clearly defined social and political aims, (Later still in 1784, the Hora revolt -Hora was a Rumanian- also had social aims. Only the presence of a few popas lent it some nationalistic colour.)

After the French revolution a spirit of liberalism swept over Europe, leading eventually to the Hungarian revolution of 1848. In the meantime, from the second half of the 18th century Rumanian nationalism gathered strength. The birth of the theory of Daco-Rumanian continuity contributed to the growth of national consciousness, demand for the recognition of the Rumanian as the fourth constituent nation of Transylvania and for personal liberty developed a previously not experienced tension between the Rumanians on the one hand, and the Hungarian Seklers and the Saxons on the other. One of the important achievements of the 1848 revolution in Hungary was the abolition of serfdom. This created an enthusiasm that the Balazsfalva meeting nationalistic ideas and aspirations seemed to be pushed in the background and the movement showed no anti-Hungarian characteristics. This, however, changed, when the revolutionary government announced the ratification of Transylvania with the Hungarian motherland. The Rumanians suddenly felt threatened, in the unified state they would become a minority under Hungarian dominance. The result was that they turned against and massacred some of the Hungarians in the Bihar region.

The growth of Slovak nationalism was slower. The Panслав ideology made some inroads in the minds of some of the intelligentsia, produced a few leaders like Sturt and Hurban, but the number of those who turned against the Hungarian revolution amounted no more than a few hundred.

So the achievement of the revolution, particularly the liberation of the serfs, which might have provided for a just and equitable ethnic policy in the future, failed to create the necessary atmosphere of mutual trust.

After the crushed revolution a period of Germanization followed in Hungary by Vienna. German was introduced in Hungary as the official language, and the language of education. It applied, of course, to the nationalities as well. The "divide et imperra" principle

was applied by promoting ethnic discord and thus to weaken Hungary internally. The aim was to create an Austrian empire of German character. This, however, failed: it alienated not only the Hungarians, but the nationalities as well. The system persecuted not only the Hungarian patriots, but also the Sturts and Hurbans.

All this changed after Austria's defeat at Koeniggratz in 1866. It was realized in Vienna that the Habsburg monarchy can not survive without the full support of Hungary. The solution was the "Ausgleich" in the following year. Although the compromise provided freedom for Hungary in internal affairs, the country's political, economic, and military dependence on Austria remained intact.

Learning from the bitter lessons of the past the newly elected Hungarian Parliament's first act was to settle the nationality problem by passing Act XLIV-1868. The parliamentary submission stated:

"We want to insure that full citizen's rights should be extended to all citizens of the country regardless of national or religions differences. Furthermore that the aspirations of our fellow citizens of other nationalities should be guaranteed by law, provided that this would not lead to the political disintegration and destruction of the independence of the country,"

This, however, was completely refused by representatives of the nationalities. They insisted that the question can be solved only by granting territorial and administrative autonomy. They demanded that they should be recognized as independent bodies i.e. nations. As early as 1861, a Slav national assembly (at Turócszentmarton) formulated: "It is necessary that the identity of our nation should be recognized in the areas where they live in unbroken masses, in the form of a Slav District in northern Hungary, created by adjusting the boundaries of the countries on ethnic lines."

The Hungarian view, opposed to this was presented and vigorously defended by well developed arguments by baron Joseph Eotvos on numerous occasions. According to this the freedom and cultural development of the nationalities is insured by equality before the law for every citizen. Regional autonomies or independent administration of law are incompetent with the spirit of modern liberalism. The country must not be divided into quasi independent parts; on the other hand the cultural development of the nationalities must be insured in every respect.

This was always the view of 19th century Hungarian liberalism, expressed by acts of the Parliament as well as by the press. There was no attempt to assimilate or "Hungarianise". Instead it aimed to establish spiritual unity on the basis of equal rights and shared responsibilities whilst guaranteeing the free cultural development of the nationalities.

Here are the views of some prominent Hungarians of the 19th century:

Count Nicholas Wesselenyi, a champion of liberal reforms wrote: "The only substitute for national unity in countries with diverse languages and national minorities is unity based on equal rights and shared interest."

Count Stephan Szechenyi, an other great figure of last century reform-movement condemned on numerous occasions and in his writings any attempt at forced assimilation. Francis Deak, the architect of the 1867 Compromise wrote: "The way to win over the nationalities is not by Hungarianising them but by creating conditions they like."

The nationalities, however, considered the Hungarian attitude narrow and impatient.

In the following half century the situation changed dramatically. The originally resented terms of the 1868 Act provided the basis for the unfulfilled demands of the nationalities, and their representatives had to put up a hard political fight to secure them. The explanation of this change as well as the key to the nationalities problem is to be found in the

1867 Compromise which left the government of the country in the hands of the landowner nobility.

Loss of cheap labours, due to the liberation of the serfs undermined the very existence of the nobles, who sought now employment in the public services, and a "culture" developed to keep non-Hungarian middle-class out of those positions available. A grieving belief in ethnic danger, the bogey of Dako-Rumanism and Panslavism provided natural fuel for this continuing mistrust.

Realizing the growing danger, a group of liberal politicians in co-operation with leaders of the nationalities proposed a new Act in 1870. As this is an important document it is worth to quote some of its sections.

It recognised that Hungarians, Rumanians, Serbians, Slovaks, Ruthenians and Germans are all constituent parts of the population of the country and are equal before the law. It upheld the political equality of the nationalities and the languages whilst maintaining the territorial integrity and political unity of the Kingdom. - It recognized in places the majority language as official and any language representing 30% as second official language. - Representatives of nationalities to use they're own languages in the Parliament. - Laws of the Kingdom and decisions of the government to be promulgated in all six languages. - In local govt. business and courts cases to be conducted in language of the client. - Every nationality entitled to their own schools and cultural associations. - In each district language used in schools to be the language of the majority. - Courses at universities to be available in all six languages.

These are but the main provision of the proposed new law which was to take effect immediately on its proclamation. The fact that this bill did not pass was due not so much to resistance by the historical classes as the chauvinistic reaction of the freshly assimilated "new" Hungarians. In this, the recently assimilated Jewry, which to a large extent controlled the press and finances played a leading role. In order to prove their "Hungarianness" these groups were quite prepared to take an extremist stance in refusing to share their newly acquired privileges with the other nationalities.

The main cause, however, was that all political, economical and cultural changes in the country favoured the ascendancy of the Hungarian part of the population: - spontaneous assimilation progressed rapidly on the fertile plains inhabited by Hungarians - rapidly developing trade and commerce attracted droves of peoples from other parts - developing infrastructure and construction of railway lines helped to develop economical unity of historical Hungary centering in the fast growing Budapest.

These are the factors, which put an end to the territorial demands and political aspirations of the nationalities at that time.

THE HISTORICAL EVOLVEMENT OF THE NUMERICAL PROPORTION OF THE NATIONALITIES

As an introduction to this theme we must consider the devastating effect of the Turkish occupation between 1540 and 1690 on the growth, movement and distribution of the population in the Carpathian basin. That 150 years effected mainly the areas where Hungarian population was dominant and the continuous movement of them to the relative safety of the northern part of the country and to Transylvania left vast tracts of land depopulated.

The first reliable data concerning the size of population comes from Acsady (I. Acsady: History of Hungary, 1900]. He based his figures on taxation data. According to this in 1720 the total number of the inhabitants in Hungary (not counting Croatia) was 2,583,000. Of this 1,161,000 were Hungarians, and 1,421,000 non-Hungarians.

The next data comes from 1787, when the fairly accurate census under Joseph II. shows a total of 8,003,000 people, including nationalities.

The comparison of the two indicates an incredible increase of over 5,000,000 in the span of less than 70 years! But how was this possible?

What in fact happened was immigration on a vast scale during this period. After the expulsion of the Turks, the Habsburgs spent huge amounts on resettlement-programs to repopulate the fertile areas, The Hungarians who fled the Turks came back, but the rich central plain also attracted Slovaks and Ruthenians from North, Rumanians from the East and Serbs from the South in large numbers. Their abandoned places were quickly filled up by immigrants from outside of the country. As a consequence, the Slovak, Ruthenian and Rumanian population increased significantly in the Carpathian basin.

Reliably accurate calculations indicate that natural increase of the indigenous people would have increased the number to 5,165,000. The difference between this figure and the census of 1787 (=2,800,000) must be the number of those immigrants who came to Hungary from outside.

Of the 8,003,000 inhabitants in 1787 ca. 2,300,000 were Hungarians against 5,600,000 nationalities, half of which entered the country during the discussed 18th century, and had not contributed in any way to the historical development or shared the traditions of the country. What follows after this is even more remarkable when we examine the 1850 census held by the that time very anti-Hungarian Austrian government. This found ca. 5 million Hungarians and 6,300,000 non-Hungarians in the country. What this means is that the Hungarians assimilated 1,700,000 foreigners in 63 years! Since the country was governed from the anti-Hungarian Vienna, there can be no doubt what so ever, that we are facing here a spontaneous and peaceful process. When the Hungarians returned to the fertile areas after t he Turkish occupation, with patient hard work they developed an increasingly efficient agriculture and vigorous urban life. The increasing living-standards, better communications, attraction of cultural life and the arrival of capitalist economy provided the catalyst of the assimilation process.

The potential of the Hungarian culture to assimilate in the 18th and 19th century is demonstrated by statistical data available from 1720 to 1910.

Year	Total population	Hungarian		Non-Hungarian	
1720	2,583,000	1,161,000	(45%)	1,421,000	(55%)
1787	8,003,000	2,322,000	(29%)	5,681,000	(71%)
1850	11,364,000	5,000,000	(44%)	6,364,000	(56%)
1880	13,750,000	8,404,070	(47%)	7,346,000	(53%)
1900	16,722,000	8,589,000	(51%)	8,133,000	(49%)
1910	18,265,000	9,698,000	(53%)	8,567,000	(47%)

According to these figures, between 1787 and 1900 approx. 2,800,000 ethnic people were absorbed in the Hungarian national body. The rate of this assimilation was not even; it was the highest in towns and in the Western and central parts and tended to decline toward the peripheral areas.

The proportion of intellectuals in the nationality groups was well below the average of the country. On the other hand, ownership of land favoured the nationalities. Only 40% of the landowners were Hungarian, 60% ethnic. There were ca. 190,000 Hungarian and 290,000 non-Hungarian small-landholders.

In conclusion one might say that the key to the exceptionally successful assimilation in historical Hungary during the 18th but particularly the 19th century, was the steadily growing economy, improving living standard, the benefits of which were shared fairly between the different nationalities.