

The Realm of Babel

THERE has been no lack of careful, scholarly studies of the unique political, social and racial problems of the Habsburg Empire and no lack of war propaganda books written to prove that this unwieldy political structure must be kept together or must be taken apart. *Austria-Hungary*, by Wolf von Schierbrand, is a happy mean between the scholarly survey and the journalistic war book. It discusses the problems of the country with unusual completeness of scope and moderation of tone, but there is an attempt to interpret the soul as well as the body, to give the meaning of facts as well as the facts themselves. The author tells us, for example, that underneath the many antagonisms of the polyglot empire, "a certain easy good-nature, a certain leisureliness, a certain trend to hospitality, a certain flabby softness and lack of rugged energy, an unpretentious kindness, a certain freshness of spirit and naiveness appear to mark them all, no matter what their race or creed." This is a fact, but you will not find it in Baedeker or the Britannica.

The author had the advantages of knowledge and sympathy. He traveled in various parts of the Habsburg realm from 1912 to 1916 and his descriptions of the people in

war time, tho too infrequent, are of great interest. Particularly vivid is his picture of the first days of the Great War:

When the night finally came, the night of July 24th, and the wire flashed the news from Belgrade that Serbia had rejected the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum, the whole town, the whole two millions of Vienna, were strung up for war. The whole town was frantic with joy. Total strangers embraced each other. They wept for joy. The nightmare of humiliation, of disdain gulped down like a nauseous drug for ages, was off their breasts. They felt like freemen, like heroes fit for battle. It was the same in Budapest; it was similar in the provincial capitals. If ever a nation went into war as to a feast, as to a cleansing, strengthening bath, Austria-Hungary surely did on that sultry, nerve-racking night of July 24th, 1914.

The greatest weakness of the Habsburg Empire is its economic backwardness and to this, in the author's opinion, is due its dependence on Germany. Hungary, for instance, with perhaps the best agricultural land in all Europe, produces only 52 per cent as much per acre of cultivated soil as Germany. The nobles hold much of the land in great estates in nearly every part of the Empire and their lands are the least productive; partly because of the space given over to hunting grounds and pleasure parks and partly because of the degraded position of the tenant farmer and agricultural laborer. The author assures us that "the Austrian people, in their vast majority, are now subsisting on about half the amount of food they habitually consumed before the war"; a natural consequence of the neglect of scientific agriculture during the years of peace. In industrial development, most of the Austro-Hungarian nationalities are generations behind the age. The author makes an exception of the Czechs of Bohemia, whom he praises as the most energetic, practical, thrifty and well educated of all the Slavic peoples, and, indeed, the equals of their German neighbors in these respects.

And here is a sketch of the gallant, reckless Magyars of Hungary:

In the course of the war I paid several short visits to Budapest. It was an entirely different atmosphere into which one plunged. Not only because there was neither lack of reliable news from every source nor of palatable meals, but also for the reason that the Hungarians at no time during the fearful struggle . . . lost courage and self-confidence. A more striking contrast those days it was hard to conceive than the timid and nervous people of Vienna and the dare-devil Magyars of Budapest. In the elegant Andassy street of that gay capital, a sort of Fifth Avenue, plus the buoyant, open-air life of the cafés with their gipsy bands forever tuning up the nerves, no stranger would have for a moment supposed he was in a city but a short distance from where a life-and-death struggle was going on—in those Carpathian passes where hecatombs of war's victims lie still bleaching in the sun. All the reckless life of a pleasure-loving city was rushing on thru it all. There was as much gambling and as much music and as much love-making as ever—at least to all appearances.

Austria-Hungary, the Polyglot Empire, by Wolf von Schierbrand. New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company. \$3.