

The Graveyard of Spirit in Central Europe

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THREE years ago, on the 17th of November, 1939, the Nazi regime in Bohemia and Moravia closed all of the Czech institutions of higher learning, theological seminaries included, executed from 120-150 students and robbed the Czech professors of teaching facilities and, moreover, of all means and instruments of private research, university libraries, clinics, laboratories, etc. The Czech students were dispersed, many hundreds of them put in concentration camps or sent to forced labor in Germany. The closing of the universities was originally termed for three years. Nobody was in doubt, however, that the closing had been permanent and that under Hitler no Central European nation will be, in the long run, permitted to build up its own way of education, to keep its own spiritual tradition, or to develop its specific genius of intellectual and artistic creativity. The leading exponent of the Nazi designs substantiated this anticipation by proclaiming,

in October, 1942: "Czech universities will not be reopened after the period originally stated is over." How could they? The Nazi regime in the subjugated countries can be maintained only after the flourishing meadows of thoughts have been converted into a graveyard of spirit. I mean it literally, and I know what I am speaking about.

Now, the 17th of November has passed and the Czech universities have remained closed. The Czech scientific research has been silenced. The Czech churches are without seminaries. The John Hus Faculty of Theology does not exist any more. It is gratifying for us to hear that a large number of American colleges and student bodies commemorated the 17th of November as the International Student Day. This day has a wider symbolical meaning transcending the boundaries of the Czech area. Bohemia and Moravia are not regarded by the Nazi as a conquered country. Hitler pledged

himself solemnly, on March 16, 1939, to "protect" the Czech nation and its cultural and national existence. Consequently, the treatment by Hitler of Czech students and schools is highly indicative both of the value of his solemn word and of the fate of all European spiritual life under his rule.

Bismarck

Even prior to the World War II, or to Munich 1938, the best interpreters of the political and spiritual events in Central Europe had foreseen what was coming in the case of Hitler's domination over his neighbors. Anybody understanding the logic of the German history since Bismarck could not fail to realize the sinister aspect of the German National Mysticism represented by the Nazis. Bismarck had liquidated all unification movements based on the principle of cooperation and voluntary federalization of German states and principalities. His scheme of the German unity had been shaped by his genuine dislike of any liberal and humanistic idea of state and by his conviction that German unity could be achieved exclusively by force, blood and iron, e.g., by a military strong Prussia. The German Republic of 1918-1932 was unable to transform the ideological nature of the German political order. Hitler eliminated from the Bismarckian heritage all the remnants of Christian tradition, brutalized political methods and applied the scheme of blood, iron and force upon the whole European Continent. Bismarck accomplished the unification of Germany by the powerful Prussian military machine, Hitler striding in his steps, has been trying to unify the European Continent by the powerful, invincible, "biological," unity of the Germanic race. Any idea of political good will, cooperation and freedom has been violently stamped out. What is now at stake is not only political and spiritual self-determination of the Central European smaller nations, but the very biological existence of Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, Lithuanians, etc.

The 17th of November, 1939, was the first step in the direction of a total destruction of the Czech intellectual tradition and national life. The situation in Poland is still worse, incomparably worse. The unique national character of the Austrians finds itself in unprecedented agony. The fact that the Austrians speak the same language as the Germans conceals the real tragedy of Austria. What would follow in the wake of Hitler's victory in Hungary, Switzerland, Holland, and Yugoslavia is equally sinister and harrowing. The whole of Europe would be gradually de-Europeanized, e.g., Europe would cease to exist.

Specific Functions of Smaller Nations

At this juncture, we may see more clearly than ever the specific function of the small and middle-sized nations of Central Europe. No matter how greatly they may be co-responsible for the present catastrophe of Europe, nevertheless, they have preserved the continuity of the classic Christian European tradition in Europe east of the Rhine. For centuries they have been living at the Easternmost boundary of the Latin and Protestant civilizations, on the dividing line between the European West and East. Much of spiritual power and of intellectual dynamics was spent in vain in this area of ethnic rivalries and political provincialism. And still it is precisely this area between Germany and the Soviet Union that presents a great promise for the days to come. The peoples are undergoing a misery and frustration of unprecedented gravity being thus brought together closer than in any preceding period of peace. For all of them it is a period of purification, a time of new visions resulting from the revision of their old shortcomings, mistakes and failures.

The reorganization of Central Europe will have to start from the common heritage of various nationalities. We had, after the armistice of 1918, been careless in two ways. First, we had neglected the common history and tradition, being all too interested in our local and ethnic peculiarities. The fact of our respective national independence and self-determination of free citizens had fascinated our minds to such an extent that we forgot the organic European, or Central European unity. National or ethnic self-determination is morally legitimate under one condition, that it becomes the means and instrument of what is universally valid, what is just and proper, good and fair. After the collapse of Austria-Hungary, Russian monarchy and German Reich, the new states were incapable of preserving some kind of common cultural roof and genuine cooperation. We had not filled the vacuum after the destruction of the old empires with joint striving for creative re-interpretation of the common classic European legacy. Our differences were more important to us than what had survived behind and beneath our ethnical and regional peculiarities. The lesson of the last decade may help us to understand one another and to listen to one another. After the period of controversy and rivalry a new period of constructive understanding and listening is coming—not unlike that within the field of Christian Theology and the Church. Instead of sectarian bickering and narrow

polemics, a deeper vision of common heritage and common mission is commencing.

Second, we had underestimated the gravity of the disease weakening the mind and body of the liberal, democratic Western World. The best Central European statesmen, i.e., T. G. Masaryk of Czechoslovakia, anticipated the moral, intellectual and political capacity of the victors of 1918 to reorganize the world. As a matter of fact, they based the program of national self-determination on the spiritual and political power of universal democracy, and thought the latter in all respects superior to the vanishing empires. Theirs was a vision of global political and social strategy. The Western World manifested, however, a total lack of leadership and of universal constructive scheme. Nothing had proved the, let us hope, temporary malady of the democratic world more deeply than its blindness as to the approaching catastrophe, its isolationist

mood of escape, its unwillingness to coordinate the progressive forces in the world, its misinterpretation of the totalitarian tendencies. Here we all are responsible.

Whenever I visualize the day when our Czech universities and schools of technology, our seminaries and other schools of learning are reopened, I realize the tremendous responsibility of their teachers and students for the revitalization of the great European heritage—a new synthesis of the common European and American basis on the one hand, and of the specific achievements on the part of the individual nations on the other. The blood and suffering of November 17, 1939, will be in vain unless we all, in the East and in the West, undergo, in the spirit of humility, the severe discipline of purification and regeneration. Without joint effort, deep conviction and mutual loyalty the reorganization of the world will be impossible.