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AN UNREALIZED REALITY:  
SOME VIEWS ON DANUBIAN FEDERATION

The proponents of the Danubian Federation were all men of different national backgrounds with one goal in common—the formation of a union that would give more national rights and civil freedoms to the peoples of the Danube basin. Long under the hegemony of the Habsburgs, these various nationalities awoke to the drum of nationalism in the middle of the nineteenth century. Nationalism came to this region later than it did to Western Europe. Ever since the waning of the Middle Ages, Serbia, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Bohemia, and Poland had been carved up by other states in quest for empire building.

The idea of forming a union among all these peoples came in the beginning of the century. It was proposed by politicians and intellectuals who sought to organize the Danube basin into a cohesive federation<sup>1</sup> that could stand as an equal among Great Powers most notably the German states and the Habsburg empire on one side and the Russian empire on the other. The most common name for these projects was the Danubian Federation although this was by no means the only one. The project names were as plentiful as their champions but this study discusses those which were the most important and, therefore, had the most impact. Although the Danubian Federation Projects remained unrealized, they influenced their epoch in a significant way—they showed all the struggling nationalities that no nation is an island and can stand by itself. They learned the lesson of cooperation.

This was not an easy lesson to learn. In struggling to achieve their own independence the various nationalities were divided rather than united in their quest. Initially, they each wanted to be in control and in effect take over the role of oppressor from the ruler they wished to unseat.

The personalities of the proponents were a definite factor in promoting the Danubian Federation Projects. One of its early proponents, Lajos Kossuth, was both an asset and liability in his personal quest for reform. Kossuth was

1. One of the earliest works was by Baron Nicholas Wesselenyi (1844).

a true believer in the cause of nationalism and democracy. However, for a long time he recognized or at least was only concerned with the nationalism of the Hungarian nation<sup>2</sup>.

This stood in the way of the promotion of the Danubian Federation Projects for several reasons. First, the different nationalities were reluctant to get involved with a project which had nothing better to offer to them in their own eyes than what they already had under the Habsburgs (which amounted to little). When Kossuth talked in his speeches about the liberties and rights all people would experience in the borders of a free and independent Hungary he talked about their rights as Hungarians which left little room for national self-expression of the others<sup>3</sup>. At this time in history it was rather imprudent of Kossuth to behave in this matter since nationalism was such an engrossing force in mid 19th century Europe. After all, this was the "age of nationalism". Kossuth, buoyed by his own nationalistic fervor, seemed oblivious that other nations felt the same way.

In 1850, after the failure of the 1848 revolution he realized that he must at least work with the other nationalities. However, in the idea of language he was intransigent. In 1850 Kossuth was adamant about retaining the Magyar language. In his writings in Turkey he compared the language situation to the one in the United States saying that it is a similar case in order to win the support of the Americans<sup>4</sup>. However, he conveniently failed to remember or was historically unaware of the fact that the English language was voted upon in the new United States and won by a narrow margin over German. If indeed, Kossuth allowed such a vote to take place the same would not occur in Hungary since the non-Magyar peoples viewed the language as one of oppression and they were the majority of the population. Kossuth chafed against the Latin imposed upon the Hungarian Diet in former centuries. This should have produced sympathy and he should have kept his own national aspirations at bay.

Later, of course, he did just that. In 1862, in the revised version of the Danubian Confederation he suggested the use of French as the language of mediation. Another concession that he eventually made was the autonomy

2. Kossuth made a distinction between "historic" and "non-historic" nations and was willing to grant the former (e.g. Croatia) concessions which he would not consider for the latter (e.g. Slovakia).

3. At that time, however, he felt that citizenship and equal rights were enough.

4. "What other can we use but the noble Hungarian?" Kossuth asks as quoted in Phineas Headley, *The Life of Louis Kossuth*, New York, 1852, p. 327.

of Transylvania (a region that remains disputed among the Hungarians and Rumanians until today). Had Kossuth made these concessions earlier, he would have gotten a lot more support from the non-Hungarian factions.

Kossuth, himself a liberal, was not a promoter of involuntary magyarization<sup>5</sup>. He stated in a report to "Deutschen reform" on December 4, 1849<sup>6</sup>, "I want a federative Danubian republic with all the elasticity that such a republic can derive from many states and one in which there is peace for all nationalities ...Hungary could very well lead like a central state if everything was not exclusively concentrated on magyarization but on the opposite was more cosmopolitan".

This shows that although Kossuth wished for a preeminent role for Hungary he did not think magyarization was a positive solution. Even in 1850 he believed in the equality of people and even if he may have thought Magyar culture superior he did not insist on cramming it down other peoples' throats. The language question to him, though, was political not cultural and in this way he differed from Palacky who thought it cultural/spiritual and Renner who thought it cultural. Kossuth thought of Magyar as a language of mediation very similar to the system in Hellenistic Greece<sup>7</sup>. This is what Kossuth was offering to the non-Magyars of Hungary though in modified form. He asked them to accept the Magyar language as the state language. They, also, would need to accept the Hungarian constitution and then would be guaranteed its rights and freedoms. What he seemed to be unable to comprehend in 1850 is that other people wanted these freedoms offered to them in the context of their own nationality. They saw Magyar as a language of oppression not any different from German and often times worse because it was all the more imposed upon the unwilling populace. According to 19th century dogma, language was the soul of a nation and its identity.

Kossuth essentially had three goals<sup>8</sup> 1) to free Hungary from Austria,

5. Refers to the practice of trying to extend Hungarian (or Magyar in the Hungarian language) hegemony over the people of other nationalities. Especially, after the Compromise of 1867 there was an effort on the part of the Hungarian government to put this into practice.

6. Joachim Kuhl, *Föderationsplane im Donauraum und in Ostmitteleuropa*, Verlag R. Oldenbourg, Munich, 1958, p. 21.

7. In Hellenistic Greece (350-301 B.C.), after adopting a Greek name and receiving a Greek education, a person in essence became a Greek as far as citizenship was concerned. Whatever culture and language he may have followed in private was irrelevant to the state. In the state as a Greek he had civil rights and liberties.

8. Rudolf Wiener, *Der Föderalismus im Donauraum*, Verlag Hermann Bohlaus, Graz, 1960, p. 60.

2) to the ban the Panslavic danger from Hungary, and 3) to bring on his side the south and east neighbors. One way of helping to achieve the latter point was to satisfy the demands of the non-Magyars in Hungary and to support/subsidize Serbian and Romanian causes abroad. The Hungarians in exile were much more likely to help their fellow exiles and their countrymen than the Hungarians who stayed behind. First, this was because in exile a common bond was forming between various statesmen such as Czartoriski and Teleki, Kossuth and Mazzini<sup>9</sup>. They saw that by working together they could reach a common goal. They also realized in their exile that it was impossible to work alone or even stand alone—they would surely be swallowed up by the Great Powers (i.e. Germany and Russia). Also, the geographical distances made them less susceptible to the ethnic strife that continued to rage within the borders of their nations. While abroad, the exiles had an easier time accepting brotherhood because they were all foreigners together. At home, they were often enemies fighting over the same patch of disputed ancestral land. In this sense the exiles were disassociated with a lot of problems that their compatriots at home felt keenly. At the same time, the geographic distance gave them a clearer, less biased view of the situation at hand.

The Hungarians that remained in Hungary were less sympathetic. First, though bitter about their defeat in 1848, some sought to work within the system to better their position. This was often done at the expense of the many non-Magyars who would continue to be oppressed. As both an exile and liberal, Kossuth was not one of these persons. He sought to achieve a semblance of brotherhood and peace. Unfortunately, a lot of his modifications and compromises came a decade too late.

Kossuth felt that the participation of Poles, Czechs, and Austro-Germans in the federation appeared undesirable despite the fact that individual nationalities in this federal state by law was completely allowed. With this came his fear of panslavism (from Poles and Czechs) and resentment of Austria (since the Austrians opposed an independent Hungary he did not want them as part of his federation). The fear of Czech and Polish panslavism while embracing the South Slavs seems rather arbitrary since the Poles long had anti-Russian feelings while the South Slavs were usually pro-Russian and looked towards the Russian empire as their protector. The Czechs, especially

9. Czartoriski and Teleki met in Paris during their exile from their respective lands (Poland and Hungary) and sought to reach a common ground for working together. Kossuth and Mazzini corresponded in letters.

before 1865, were inclined towards more Austroslavism<sup>10</sup> any way. Influenced by Mazzini, he also saw the Hungarians uniting with the Latins (Italians, Rumanians) and South Slavs since in including the Western Slavs legitimacy would have to have been given to the Slovaks and that Kossuth was not prepared to do<sup>11</sup>. Nevertheless, Kossuth had a following and fame and was looked upon as important figure in his time.

On the other hand, Romanian Aurel Popovici was a man caught in the middle. There was no one fully behind him and he walked a fine line between the different factions. Ostensibly, he had the support of Franz Ferdinand but it is somewhat difficult to discern what the archduke's interests in Popovici were. Franz Ferdinand was a proponent of trialism. Trialism was a proposal to expand dualism wherein the Slavs would have equal rights to the Germans and the Hungarians within the Habsburg monarchy.

Some historians claim that this was due in part to his morganatic Czech wife, Sophie, while other suggest it was a tactic to pressure the Hungarians to be more cooperative (the Hungarians were blocking various Austrian projects at this time such as the *Zollverein*). In any case, Franz Ferdinand's interests tended more towards the military and there was no room for Romanians in trialism. He may have been a sympathizer of Popovici's because Popovici initially was a proponent of the idea of Great Austria and even called his thesis on the subject of Danubian union, *Die Vereinigten Staaten von Gross-Oesterreich* (*The United States of Great Austria*).

The Romanian nationalists wanted to annex the largely Romanian parts of the Habsburg empire (Bukovina, Transylvania) with Romania proper. Therefore, Popovici's ideas were not radical enough. They wished no part of Great Austria but rather hoped for a Greater Romania. The Hungarian nationalists within the empire, on the other hand, felt that Popovici had gone too far and censored him and his work (although, ultimately, they were unable to keep it out of the hands of the public). The Hungarian emigres had ceased to be a factor of internal politics after the compromise. Popovici could have found common ground with Kossuth but they were four decades apart in their writings. Kossuth would also have not approved of the Great Austria

10. An early proponent of both Austroslavism and federation, Frantisek Palacky, wrote his major works on federation in 1848.

11. In Otto Zarek's biography, Kossuth is described as speaking Hungarian with his father, German with his mother and Slovak with the servants (Otto Zarek, *Kossuth*, New York, 1970, p. 15). Slovaks were mostly of the peasant and/or servant class in Hungary at this time which explains their low economic and political status.

idea but he was interested in compromising in terms of a federal establishment and he shared Popovici's anti-Russian sentiments<sup>12</sup>.

Karl Renner, on the other hand, would have agreed with Popovici on the idea of Great Austria but would have disagreed with him on the territorial principle. Karl Renner, writing under the pseudonym of Rudolf Springer, decided that the most important part of civil liberty was the idea of personal, not territorial, autonomy which he perceived for two reasons. First, he felt that by having personal autonomy persons would have the same rights wherever they would happen to be residing at the time. For example, under his system a Pole in Vienna would enjoy the same rights as he would in his native Galicia. Secondly, it would be individual, whereby each person would have rights in the entire federation and not be limited to any one territory. Renner felt that in binding persons to territory true freedom would be precluded throughout the entire federation.

Renner proposed a *Staatenstaat* —a state of states— a supranational idea through which nationalities could be satisfied by having cultural autonomy. This includes the freedom to speak in their own language not only in educational bodies (eg. schools, universities) but also in the legislative and national assemblies. The important significance of cooperative thinking lies in the negotiations of the regions, the state, and its administration. Renner writes that if we were Hegelians we could see the "almost graceful play from thesis to antithesis and finally must unite in a higher synthesis" as he refers to what he sees as the natural transition from nation state to supranational state. Then he goes on to say that "historical regions are only the fetish of government... as long as this fetish is enthroned we do not come to any rational decision"<sup>13</sup>.

Renner continues to say that these crownlands are only irritants even in terms of the Austro-Germans and the decisions they make. He calls the Austro-Germans "crownland autonomists"<sup>14</sup> saying that when they are the minority from Czernowitz to Trieste they clamor for nationally recognized rights but in the provinces where they make up the majority, they seek a specific identity such as Tyroleans, Styrians, etc.<sup>15</sup>. This can be used to point out

12. The majority of the proponents of federation saw the Russian empire as much a threat as the Habsburgs. They saw themselves as "the lands between" likely to get squeezed or overtaken by the ambitions of their imperial neighbors.

13. Renner, *Der Kampf der Österreichischen Nationen um den Staate*, Leipzig, 1902, p. 40.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

15. *Ibid.*

that Renner was not unaware of the fickleness of the Austro-German population and was willing to take them to task for it. In this way, he was more neutral than the others in his quest for personal and national autonomy because as a socialist he had the common man first regardless of his nationality.

Renner goes on to say that since Poles and Czechs are crownland majorities they, too, are virulent adherents of the crownland system. Not discriminating as to who holds the majority, Renner calls the crownlands the internal foe of the Habsburg monarchy. According to him, they make "disappointed minorities and inconsiderate majorities"<sup>16</sup>. Renner believed that by making the crownlands obsolete, he was creating a path towards true federalism.

In this way, Renner differed from such proponents as Croat U. Ostrožinski who believed that the territorial principle was the right solution and people would find their rights in their traditional homelands. Renner wanted to avoid this because he felt that among other things this could lead to strong irredentas forming in regionally separated areas. By building a strong supranational structure, Renner hoped to unite all in the same government, regardless of particular national sentiments leaving that to the cultural realm.

This seems like the wisest choice since Renner sought to have unifying factors hold the federation together as well as trying to benefit the position of the classes at the same time. However, he was doing it under the mantle of the Great Austria idea utilizing German as the language of mediation which was unacceptable to non-German nationalists. Some nationalists did not see the benefits of federal cooperation because they were at the nation state level of development. Renner's theories had already passed from nationalism to supranationalism.

Popovici was more monarchial in his bent and sought to include the monarch at every stage of his plan for the United States of Austria. This should have pleased the Austro-German hierarchy and made it a more solid backer but that did not turn out to be the case. Popovici believed in the territorial principle and, therefore, made certain that each of the fifteen nationalities had their own area<sup>17</sup>. Beyond that he was not too concerned with the nationalities and left a lot of the task in his plan to the emperor.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Popovici's fifteen member states included the following: 1) German-Austria, 2) German-Bohemia, 3) German-Moravia, 4) Bohemia, 5) Hungary, 6) Transylvania, 7) Croatia, 8) West-Galicia, 9) East-Galicia, 10) Slovakia, 11) Krain, 12) Voivodina, 13) Szekerland, 14) Trento, and 15) Trieste.

The area in which Popovici was radical was his demand for the autonomy of Transylvania. The ruling Hungarians found this too revolutionary and promptly drove Popovici out of the country. R. W. Seton-Watson had the opportunity to converse with people living in the empire about Popovici's book<sup>18</sup> and he got the following responses: *Editor Pacatian* stated that, "Popovici's book is good but not practical, his views are not favored by the majority of Romanians...excellent in theory and would be better for us Romanians but unworkable because the Magyars would sooner give their last drop of blood than consent".

*Canon Bunea* praised Popovici's book strongly, "as altogether excellent" and said it represented the "large majority view" of the Romanians of Transylvania". These two examples indicate a contradiction between what different people believed or at least the message that they publicly delivered. Likewise, the ruling Hungarians in the monarchy were not at all pleased with Kossuth's 1862 Danubian Confederation and its liberal proposals even though other Hungarians, especially the exiles, may have favored it. When choosing between Austria and the Slavs the Hungarians in Hungary favored Austria. In conversations with other Romanians R. W. Seton-Watson came across varying opinion on language as well. *Maniu*, a member of parliament for *Balazsfalva* (Blaj) stated "The introduction of Magyar would be dangerous to the State, because it would be hated by half the nation...German would have the advantage of being a neutral language, whereas use of Magyar would accentuate the rivalry between the various races"<sup>19</sup>.

On the other hand, Russu-Sirianu, editor of "Tribuna" fully recognized Hungarian as language of State and in Parliament and did not think it necessitated a change while Dr. Mandl, an Austrian journalist, author, and attorney, was convinced of the peasants' ability to speak Hungarian. He gave an example where "in a particular village every man can speak Hungarian as well as himself (Mandl) but no one will use it before a tribunal"<sup>20</sup>.

This would seem to suggest that the problem was more of stubborn need for national self-expression rather than ability. It is difficult to look at such studies as scientific though because most people were prejudiced towards their own side. In any case language could not be discounted as a minor factor

18. These conversations took place in Hermannstadt, Transylvania, 1906. Cornelia Bodea and Hugh Seton-Watson, *R. W. Seton-Watson and the Romanians 1906-1920*, Editura Stiintifica Si Enciclopedica, Vol. I, Bucharest, 1988, pp. 165-171.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 169.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 171.



because if they could not agree on a language of communication how were they going to discuss more pressing needs such as civil rights and liberties?

Some federalists viewed nation and territorial integrity as the most important aspect of the whole plan. Ostrozinski, for example, put most of his faith in territory since by freeing people from national oppression, he saw this as freedom from major masters. He insisted that autonomy be granted within ethnic frontiers and not the historical crownlands. He divided the nations into seven<sup>21</sup> and put all of the South Slavs (Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes) together. This indicated that he believed in South Slav solidarity, at least in terms of ethnicity. However, he also lumped the Poles and Ruthenians (Ukrainians) together who were of separate ethnic origin and long sustained both enmity and religious differences. Ostrozinski was a firm believer in the preservation of Austria. Like most of the federalists in 1848, Ostrozinski did not want to disband Austria but rather to rearrange it. In this way, his federal theories were similar to Ludwig Loehner, Frantisek Palacky, and the later proposals of Renner and Popovici.

Palacky had another viewpoint to bring to the Slav side. As a representative of the Western Slavs (Bohemians), he was always oriented more towards the West and, therefore, for a long time looked to Austria to fulfill the federative goals he sought. As the climate in Austria did not change in the second half of the nineteenth century, and Russia was becoming more liberal during the reign of Alexander II, Palacky rethought his position and looked upon Russia more favorably<sup>22</sup>. He is the only proponent to change his mind so fully about the role of Russia vis-à-vis the independence of the nations under Habsburg rule.

It is interesting to note that Austrian absolutism made Palacky embrace panslavism in his later years. It is questionable if he would have done so had *Ausgleich* not occurred and anti-Slav repression continued.

For Serbians Svetozar Miletic, Mihailo Polith-Desancic, and Ilya Garasanin the idea of federation was tied to panslavism and the solution of the Eastern question. The former two, being from the Voivodina region controlled by Hungary, were willing at first to work within the system. However, when they saw that this was not to be a viable option they sought solutions else-

21. The nations Ostrozinski referred to were: 1) German, 2) Czech, Moravian, Silesian, and Slovak, 3) Magyar, 4) South Slav (Serb, Croat, Slovene), 5) Polish and Ruthenian, 6) Rumanian, 7) Italian.

22. Palacky, in his later years, after Austria left the Slavs without equal rights in the aftermath of *Ausgleich* (1867), turned instead to Russia and panslavism.

where. Polith-Desancic felt that a large confederacy was necessary because otherwise the nations were too small and weak. In his book, *Die Orientalische Frage und Ihre Organische Lösung* (1862), Polith-Desancic proposed the idea of an "Eastern Switzerland" which would serve as a buffer between Germany and Russia.

Miletic, also, felt that the time for Russian intervention was over and it was time for the Balkan peoples to rise from their oppressors and form their own federal union. He thought that if they did not do so they would this time be swallowed up by the Great Powers after their release from Turkish hegemony was complete. Miletic, also stresses the breakup of both multinational states (Habsburg and Ottoman) which he sees as the oppressors of the South Slavs. His motto was "The Balkans to the Balkan people"<sup>23</sup> and in this way extinguished any idea of cooperation with Austria.

For Garasanin, the idea of federation was even more simple since his part of Serbia was already autonomous. What he sought to gain was the protectorship of a Great Power in his effort to build a strong Balkan coalition/federation. In Garasanin's opinion any solution that includes Austria is not a solution to the Eastern question since Austria sought dominance in that sphere. The Eastern question was paramount to the Serbians because of both proximity and immediacy. Without a solution, their fate lay in the hands of others. In his letter to Napoleon III, Garasanin proposed a federation of states from the Baltics to the Balkans that would serve as a buffer between Germany and Russia<sup>24</sup>.

Although Oscar Jaszi and his time frame exceeded the parameters of this study (1848-1918), he needs to be included because in his thought and writings there is more continuity with the past rather than with his contemporaries. The evidence for this is in the type of federation he sought to establish and the continuous reference to Kossuth and Renner. Jaszi did not want to destroy the empire (which makes him similar to all early proponents except for Kossuth) but rather to reform it in such a way that would most benefit all Danubian people. Among these he counted the Austro-Germans and wrote in 1934, "Only two real solution can be imagined (for Austria): a Danubian federation which would provide an outlet for its industry, commerce, and

23. Svetozar Miletic, *Die Orientfrage*, Verlag der Serbisch-Nationalen Vereins-Buchdruckerei, Neusatz, 1877, p. 2.

24. Vojislav Vuckovic, *Politicka Akcija Srbije u Juznoslovenskim Pokrajinama Habsburske Monarhije*, Serbian Academy of Science, Beograd, 1965, p. 232.

unrivalled scientific activities, or *Anschluss* with Germany"<sup>25</sup>.

Naturally, Jaszi preferred the former to the latter. In fact, in his plan for a federation, Jaszi, unlike his conational Kossuth, sought to retain Austria within the federation and thereby provide it with a more Western center. Still, he was an admirer of Kossuth's and discussed his idea of Danubian Confederation as being "an ingenious anticipation of a historical necessity". He went on to say, "Only an economic and political alliance between Hungary and Rumania and Serbia (and later with Bohemia) would be capable of guaranteeing the independence of these smaller states against Pan-German and Pan-Slav pressure and at the same time, in connection with the solution of the nationality problem, to maintain efficiently the peace of Central Europe"<sup>26</sup>.

Jaszi was also an admirer of Karl Renner for his belief that the national situation in the Habsburg monarchy was too complicated to be solved by dividing areas purely on ethnic considerations. He admired Renner's idea of the principle of personality which went against efforts to solve problems on a territorial basis calling it "a new and ingenious system of national autonomy"<sup>27</sup>. Jaszi's own thought was that the peoples of the monarchy were still living in a prenatal stage and incapable of creating a unified entity<sup>28</sup>.

Part of the problem with all the federalists was that they saw a lot of the federative efforts were made with national goals in mind. Those national goals of freedom and self-determination superseded any federal goals they tried to attain.

In general, it seemed that the proponents tended to agree to disagree if only that would bring them closer to the goal of Danubian unification. However, their co-nationalists agreed to disagree on the majority of points bringing them not a step closer to creating a strong, federative state in that region.

This was unfortunate as the idea of Danubian federation was not unattainable. In fact, it was an important and viable alternative to the decaying empire it sought to reform and the future of fervent nationalism that it could have stopped. By offering the Danubian peoples a strong federal alternative

25. Oscar Jaszi, "The Crisis in the Succession States", *The Nation*, Vol. 139, No. 360, November 14, 1934, p. 557.

26. Oscar Jaszi, *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1929, p. 313.

27. Oscar Jaszi, *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy*, p. 178.

28. Oskar Jaszi, *Der Zusammenbruch des Dualismus und die Zukunft der Donaustaaten*, Manzschke Verlags, Vienna, 1918, p. 14.

to both foreign oppression and self-induced isolation, a Danubian Federation could have been a strong buffer state in the center of Europe. This could have prevented Great Power encroachment and aggression and paved the way for a democratic solution.

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