

THE MORAL OF AUSTRIA

BY CHRISTOPHER DAWSON

world turning point
end of Austria
crisis

No Catholic can regard the passing of Austria with indifference. The State which took its form and historical character from the struggle to defend Catholicism against the Reformation and Christianity against the Turk, and which has been for so many centuries the embodiment of Catholic culture in Central Europe, has ceased to exist and with it a whole epoch in the history of Christendom has ended.

It is true that the doom of Austria was already sealed in 1918 when the city of the Kaisers, who had ruled from Transylvania to Flanders and from Breslau to Milan, became the capital of an insignificant and impoverished republic. Things might have fallen out otherwise had the Allies adopted a different attitude in 1917-18; had there been different treaties and different post-war policies; had it been possible to make life possible for the vanquished and to maintain some kind of economic co-operation between the States of the former Habsburg Empire. But the reorganization of Central Europe on the basis of national self-determination rendered the veto on the Anschluss both illogical and unjust, and the last hope for Austrian separation vanished when the Germans turned for salvation to the creed of National-Socialism and found their leader in Herr Hitler, the man from Upper Austria, who was at once the symbol and embodiment of Austro-German unity.

We, in England, who still read history through nineteenth-century spectacles are apt to regard the Germany that Bismarck created as the historic Germany, and Austria as a different country with its own national life. We forget the amorphous unity of the older Empire and the part that Austria played in the history of German culture. Actually Austria and Prussia, Vienna and Berlin, are nothing but the two poles, towards which the opposing currents in German life converged, and round which they crystallized, culturally and politically. But the whole tendency of modern history has undermined the religious and cultural division on which this opposition was based, and the simultaneous fall of the Second Reich and the Habsburg Empire destroyed the political and constitutional systems in which it had become embodied.

Thus the reunion of Austria to the body of Germany is in the logic of history. It is as much our work as that of the Nazis, and we have no more right to quarrel with the principle of Austro-German unity than with the unity of the Serbs with the Croats, or the Czechs with the Slovaks. The wheel has now come full circle. The Habsburgs, like the Hohenzollerns and the Bourbons, have entered the kingdom of the shades and it is not right that the ghosts of their dead rivalries should still decide the fate of nations.

But though we must admit the legitimacy of the end, it is a very different matter to approve the means by which that end has been attained. Herr Hitler's *coup d'état* has given a shock to the whole European State system, which was unstable enough before. It has accentuated still further that division of Europe into two camps, which may reach a disastrous climax in the desperate solution of war. The dread of a fresh blow, delivered with the swiftness and violence that is characteristic of German action, is keeping Europe on tenterhooks and makes public opinion in every country nervous and hysterical. And this state of things is being exploited by political extremists and by the publicists

of the Left who seem to believe that violence of speech will, in some inexplicable way, prevent the dictatorships from having recourse to violence in action.

The interest of England is peace—an interest which transcends all differences of political opinion and unites all reasonable people in the country, without distinction of class or party. But there is no virtue in a peace which consists in sitting still till our enemies are strong enough to destroy us. The only peace worth having is one that is based on a common understanding and the will to co-operate within definite limits to safeguard common interests.

Now there is one interest that all European States have in common—the prevention of war between the great Powers; for, as Herr Hitler himself has recognized, a repetition of the disaster of 1914 would be not only a crime, but a hideous mistake from which none, except, perhaps, the extra-European Powers, could hope to reap any advantage.

But if we want peace, we must face the realities of the situation. We must admit the failure of the Versailles settlement, we must accept the fact of the Third Reich and the hegemony of Germany in Central Europe. But, on the other hand, we must demand that Germany should accept the fact of the British Empire and should recognize our right to have a voice in the establishment of a European order which is primarily the business of the continental power—of Germany and France and Italy—but which at the same time involves the vital interests of this country.

Such an understanding seems further away today than at any time since the Great War. But this is in great measure due to the mistakes of the Western Powers who have combined intransigence with weakness, who have refused to make necessary concessions until it was too late, and they were driven to an undignified and protesting retreat.

To restore our position two things are necessary:—

1. *National unity*, without which it is impossible for democracy to survive. It was the failure of the democratic system to provide the necessary minimum of unity which led to the rise of the dictatorships in Italy and Central Europe, and the same factor handicaps the Western democracies in their international relations, as we see from the fact that a dictator can reckon on France being without a government whenever an international crisis is at hand.

2. *National reorganization*. The need of military and economic reorganization for purposes of national defence is already clearly recognized. But there is no less need for a political reorganization which will make it possible for democratic government to acquire the unity of control and rapidity of action which at present give the dictatorships so great an advantage in movements of emergency. Above all, it is necessary for democratic governments to find some way of establishing direct personal relations with the rulers of other States. In the past this was achieved in large measure by the personal action of the sovereign, as, for example, King Edward VII, and now that the dictators wield a greater power than any nineteenth-century sovereign, the need for some similar method, adapted to the needs of the new times, has become a pressing necessity. In diplomacy, no less than in war, it is necessary to feel that the whole weight of the nation is behind its leaders. If the nation is represented by men who can be disavowed, who fear to take important decisions, who cannot be sure of the support of cabinet, or parliament, or people, their action will be vacillating and ineffective and they will be kept in play with conversations and diplomatic manœuvres, while the men of power make their decisions in cynical disregard of the protests of the men of words.

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