

THE ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND THE CARINTHIAN QUESTION, 1918 - 1920

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Some fifteen years ago I published a book with the same title as this paper.¹ This title was chosen because of two facts: first, the research was based mainly on primary sources found in U.S. archives; and second, a close study of the diplomatic encounter in Paris showed that the American Commission to Negotiate the Peace played the leading role in the problem of the disposition of the southeastern part of Carinthia between Austria and Yugoslavia. Actually it was due to President Wilson that the dispute over Carinthia was settled by means of the plebiscite, the result of which turned out to be favorable for Austria: the Karavanke/Karawanken mountains, the southern border of the old Habsburg crown duchy of Carinthia, became the boundary of the Austrian republic.

The Carinthian question (or, as it was referred to in Paris, the "Question of the Klagenfurt Basin") was one of the many territorial issues the Paris Peace Conference had to deal with. Slovene settlement in Carinthia goes back to early medieval times. By the fifteenth century the Slovene population was reduced mainly to the rural parts of Southeastern Carinthia: the majority of the people living in the cities and small market-towns in the area was German. After World War I and the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the newly-established Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (SHS)—the first Yugoslavia—claimed all the Slovenes of Southern Carinthia and of Styria as well, on the basis that the frontiers of the new Yugoslav State should include all persons of Slovene descent.

After debating the Carinthian question for quite some time, the Peace Conference produced the plebiscite solution. The plebiscite was held on October 10, 1920, and the final result showed that 22,025 persons had voted for Austria and 15,278 for Yugoslavia: Austria thus won 59.04% of the total vote. The Southeastern part of the Celovec/Klagenfurt Basin, constituting "Zone A", where the plebiscite was held, contained a population of about 70% speakers of Slovene, according to the Austrian census of 1910 which was based on the *Umgangssprache*, i.e., the language normally spoken. Winning only 41% of the votes in the face of this 70% "Umgangssprache" Slovene figure was a bitter surprise for Yugoslavia: it meant that 10,000 Slovene-speaking voters had voted for Austria.²

This contrast—the numerical result of the plebiscite as compared to the figures from the 1910 census—already shows the difficulty with which the Peace Conference had to cope with respect to the principles on which a solution should be based. The Klagenfurt Basin was inhabited by a mixed population, including important Slovene elements whose economic interests (as the American experts found out) inclined them towards Austria. The British and the French delegations considered the population of the Klagenfurt Basin to be indisputably Slovene, anxious to unite with Yugoslavia. The Klagenfurt Basin is a geographical entity, separated from the south by the Karawanken mountains. For this reason the Basin was an area of economic interest more closely connected with districts to the north than with those to the south. Commercial and economic reasons pointed to the maintenance of the unity of the Basin. For the allies who negotiated the peace in Paris, the question was whether precedence should be given to topological and economic considerations rather than to ethnographic

ones, or whether the Yugoslav-Austrian boundary in this region should be drawn mainly on ethnic principles, with the result that the Klagenfurt Basin would be divided.

Before the beginning of the negotiations in Paris, U.S. experts in their recommendation to their President on January 21, 1919 adopted an “ethnic” solution: they proposed dividing the Basin and giving to Yugoslavia the portion south of the Drava/Drau river, departing from the language line only so far as was necessary to avoid the confusion of economic relations. This, the main river in Carinthia and one of the largest tributaries of the Danube, rises in Tyrol and flows east; it more or less bisects the southern area of the Klagenfurt Basin. An earlier report of the so-called U.S. “Inquiry” (i.e., the wartime preparations for the postwar settlement) of October 1, 1918 also recommended a border-line along the Drau, as did the British in their Peace Handbooks.³

As a result of the reports of the American Miles Mission, following its investigatory tour through Carinthia (see below), the original opinion of the American Commission to Negotiate the Peace was reversed. After the report from the Miles Mission, the U.S. experts in Paris were convinced that, in dealing with the question of the Klagenfurt Basin, economic considerations should outweigh ethnological ones. The unity of the Basin should be maintained, since the population opposed any division; the area should be given to Austria because, with respect to “national desires” (to use the terminology in the report) the Miles Mission, in their on-the-spot studies, had discovered that the majority of the people—even, the majority of the Slovene inhabitants—preferred Austrian rule. Lt.-Col. Sherman Miles put it as follows: “The outstanding fact is the large number of Slovenes who avowedly prefer Austrian rule, or whose political creed is an undivided Carinthia . . . The Slovene who does not want to be a Yugo-Slav is a curiosity we should never have believed if we had not seen him, and in large numbers.” This raised the question as to what “self-determination” meant when applied to a people who did not want to join the nation of their blood-brothers, or else were absolutely indifferent to all national questions, however these effects may have been produced. According to Miles, “self-determination” in a case like the one at hand should be taken in its literal meaning. Since the factor of economics entered so largely into the present and future happiness of these people, it should be given the greatest consideration.—Thus read the Miles Mission reports.⁴

The materials from the Miles Mission served to orient the U.S. delegation in Paris. As mentioned above, because of this information the U.S. experts decided to give precedence to topological and economic considerations over ethnological ones. And, more important, the U.S. delegation succeeded in convincing the British and French delegates to adopt the same policy. Because of Italy’s outright hostility towards Yugoslavia, and also because of Italy’s vital interest in the railway connections through Carinthia, the Italian delegation had adopted a pro-Austrian policy from the beginning of the negotiations.

The English and French experts involved in the disposition of the Klagenfurt Basin were not however convinced, as were the U.S. experts, of the pro-Austrian sentiments of the indigenous Slovenes. While they agreed to the Karawanken mountains being the boundary between Yugoslavia and Austria, they proposed an investigation, or consultation, to the north of this line. The method of investigation was to be defined later: it turned out to be a formal plebiscite. Since the U.S. delegation, like the British and French delegations, believed the Basin to be a geographic and economic entity, they held that the plebiscite, too, should relate to the whole of the Basin. A vote in this large area (comprising, more or less, what were later labeled Zone A and Zone B), including

the city of Klagenfurt, would have undoubtedly resulted in favour of Austria.⁵

On May 29, 1919, the Council of Four again agreed that the Klagenfurt Basin as a whole should be disposed of by means of a plebiscite.⁶ The first decision in this respect was reached by the Supreme Council on May 12. On June 4, however, a solution was devised that was based on ethnological considerations and would facilitate a division of the Basin. At the meeting of the Four on June 4 President Wilson accepted the division of the Basin into two zones, according to the demands of the Yugoslav delegation. Wilson did however refuse to accept the outright cession of the Southern Zone to Yugoslavia that was claimed by the experts from the SHS. The final text of the treaty of Saint-Germain, signed on September 10, 1919, provided for a plebiscite by zones.⁷

Zone A, the southerly and larger zone, covering about 622 square miles and with about 73,000 inhabitants, predominantly Slovene in speech, was to vote first. Zone B, an area measuring about 133 square miles, including the city of Klagenfurt, had a population of about 54,000, predominantly Germanophones; this area was to vote only if the plebiscite in Zone A resulted in favor of Yugoslavia. The line of demarcation between the two zones, as had been claimed by the Yugoslavs, constituted an ethnic line. Seventy percent of the population in Zone A were Slovene-speaking; the vote in this area could be expected to go in favour of Yugoslavia.

Of the earlier decisions of the Conference prescribing a plebiscite for the whole of the Klagenfurt Basin (because of the preference for economic over ethnographic considerations), only the principle of a plebiscite survived. And it did so solely because of President Wilson. The British, French and Italian delegations at that time had shifted their position and proposed the division of the Basin following the Yugoslav demands. We must make a brief jump backwards in time to show this development. Originally, on February 8, the Yugoslavs had claimed a frontier that lay far to the north of Klagenfurt, thus including not only Klagenfurt itself, the provincial capital, but also Beljak/Villach, the second largest city and an important railroad junction. They dropped these maximal demands on May 19 after the Supreme Council had for the first time, on May 12, agreed that a plebiscite should be held in the whole of the Klagenfurt Basin. On May 19 the Yugoslavs reduced their demands and devised a compromise solution: they divided the Basin into the two zones, A and B, on the basis that Zone A should be yielded to Yugoslavia and Zone B to Austria, both without any plebiscite.

The portion of the Klagenfurt Basin that the Yugoslavs demanded after May 19 would have given Yugoslavia the region of Velikovec/Völkermarkt as well as Pliberk/Bleiburg, Borovlje/Ferlach and Železna Kapla/Eisenkappel; and it would have given Austria Klagenfurt and Villach. Wilson, being influenced by the reports of the Miles Mission, insisted on the unity of the area and, on May 19, forced a decision of the Council of Four that provided for a plebiscite for the whole of the Basin. Finally, on June 4, he accepted the Yugoslav suggestion of dividing the Basin into the two zones. He opposed, however, the Yugoslav demand for the outright cession of Zone A to Yugoslavia and Zone B to Austria. Plebiscites were, in his view, to be held in any event.⁸

Nevertheless, on June 4 the Yugoslav delegate Vesnić protested against a plebiscite, on the grounds that although the Slovene inhabitants of Zone A were in the majority, a plebiscite would be unjust owing to their passivity, which had been induced by 50 years of German propaganda.⁹ In his report to the American Commission to Negotiate the Peace of February 12, Archibald Cary Coolidge, head of the U.S. Field Mission in Vienna, had foreseen these Yugoslav arguments. He wrote:

“The Slovenes will undoubtedly claim that the Austrian leanings of their brethren in Carinthia are due to . . . Germanization, and that in a few years under the rule of their own people the Carinthian Slovenes would become as loyal to their nationality as the rest of their brethren. This may be so but it is not certain. The economic and other forces may be too strong the other way. It is, too, precisely the argument used by the Germans in regard to the French sentiment of Alsace in the year 1871, and history has shown the falsity of that argument. We are dealing with the way people feel now, not with the way they may be going to feel some day.”¹⁰

Vesnić’s strong opposition to the holding of a plebiscite in Zone A (an area which in 1910, cf. above, had had a Slovene-speaking majority of 70%) made Lloyd George express the view that Vesnić’s evidence tended rather to support the views expressed by President Wilson’s experts.¹¹ Lloyd George referred to Charles Seymour and Clive Day, the U.S. delegates on the Committee for the Study of Territorial Questions Relating to Rumania and Yugoslavia (whose title was shortened to “Territorial Committee”), which had been entrusted by the Supreme Council with the preliminary examination of the question of the northern boundary of Yugoslavia, and which had started its work on March 2, 1919. Seymour’s and Day’s arguments had been strongly influenced by other U.S. experts, namely, Lt.-Col. Miles and his group, whose 10-day investigation in Carinthia (see above) had submitted detailed reports on their field-work to the U.S. delegation.¹²

Miles and his companions were members of the U.S. Field Mission headed by Coolidge. Sent to Vienna by the U.S. delegation at Paris, the task of this Mission was to investigate questions relating to the succession states of the Habsburg Empire. In November and December 1918 Slovene troops had occupied most parts of South-eastern Carinthia, including the main town in this area, Völkermarkt. In January 1919 Austrian forces succeeded in expelling the Yugoslav troops completely from the Rož/Rosental area to the south of Klagenfurt. Negotiations for an armistice took place in Graz. Coolidge sent two of his men, Miles and Lt. Leroy King, to Graz to observe the negotiations. These were about to break down when Miles proposed that, pending a decision by the Peace Conference, a temporary line of demarcation should be fixed by himself, after on-the-spot study. In this way, the fighting would be stopped and lives saved. Miles’ proposal was accepted by the Carinthian and the Slovene governments; also, authorization came from Coolidge. The group that was chosen to go to Carinthia consisted of two army officers, Miles and King; a professor from the University of Wisconsin, Lawrence Martin; and a professor of Slavic languages at the University of Missouri, Robert J. Kenner; as well as one Carinthian and one Slovene representative. The group travelled throughout the Southeastern part of Carinthia for ten days, January 27 to February 5, 1919. Actually, they covered, almost exactly, the territory of what was later Plebiscite Zone A. They questioned inhabitants of all kinds and occupations as to whether they wished to be ruled by Austria or Yugoslavia, where their markets were, and so on. All members of the Mission except one received the distinct impression that an overwhelming majority of the people did not wish Carinthia to be divided. Therefore, the Miles Mission recommended the Karawanken mountains as the best demarcation line, and also as the best permanent frontier. Only Kerner asked for a line drawn along the River Drau.¹³

The reports of the Miles Mission were not published, its recommended demarcation line not drawn. Members of the U.S. delegation were afraid of being accused of

unilateral moves. There was a resumption of the Carinthian *Abwehrkampf* (referred to by Yugoslav historians as the "struggle for the northern border of Slovenia", and by Thomas Barker in its direct translation, "self-defense struggle".)¹⁴ In late April and early May 1919 Yugoslav troops were almost completely driven from the area by the forces of the Carinthian provincial government and volunteer corps. At the end of May Yugoslav forces succeeded in over-running two-third of the Basin, and on June 6 captured Klagenfurt.

Adherents of the Yugoslav view have ever since held that the Miles reports were inconclusive with respect to the desires of Carinthians. Critics have pointed out that the Austrian side had been able to exert an undue degree of influence. Nevertheless, the result of the plebiscite showed that the assessment made by the Mission was not that wrong. This argument can be put even more strongly: when the plebiscite was administered, Zone A had been governed by the Yugoslav authorities, as well as occupied by Yugoslav troops, for more than one year. Yugoslav legislation was extended to the whole Zone; the demarcation line between the two zones was completely closed, and traffic between the two parts of the Klagenfurt Basin thus entirely discontinued. In her notable study of 1933, Sarah Wambaugh expressed the argument as follows: "There can be no doubt that the plebiscite was conclusive, for the advantage in Zone A lay with Yugoslavia through the fact that the administrative officials and the laws in force there were her own. For this reason, had the vote gone for Yugoslavia in that zone, the result would not have been so decisive."¹⁵ On the other hand, there is a good possibility that during this one year of being cut off from their markets the Slovene farmers of Southeastern Carinthia became convinced that Carinthia should not be divided, even more so than they were before.

Recent years have seen the tendency in historical studies dealing with the Austrian, Yugoslav and Italian peace settlements, to regard the disposal of the Klagenfurt Basin as more or less a foregone conclusion. It has been said that Carinthia was given to Austria only by way of a compromise, because Maribor/Marburg was left to Yugoslavia.¹⁶ As mentioned above, the preliminary examination of the question of the northern border of Yugoslavia was carried out by the so-called Territorial Committee. On April 6, 1919 this Committee adopted a report. For the Klagenfurt district, the U.S., British and French delegates proposed that the Austro-Yugoslav frontier should follow the Karawanken mountains. The Basin should be assigned to Austria, but the population would have the opportunity to protest. According to this Committee's April 6 report, the Meža/Miess valley, as well as Dravograd/Unterdrauburg and the basin of Maribor in Styria, were to be given to Yugoslavia.¹⁷

With respect to the Meža Valley, to Maribor, and also to the Prekmurje region, a compromise was in fact reached. The U.S. delegates agreed to the proposal that the Meža Valley and Maribor should be assigned to Yugoslavia; the British, on the other hand, adopted the U.S. view, that Prekmurje should be Hungarian. All the delegations were unanimous about giving the Klagenfurt Basin to Austria. With regard to Maribor, an explanation for the swift compromise could be the following: that the successor states of the Danube Monarchy were not created by the Peace Conference, but came into existence independently. The Peace Conference accepted *faits accomplis* and only tried to determine unresolved problems.¹⁸ Maribor had been occupied by general Majster since November 1918 without any reasonable counteraction on the part of either Austria or Styria. It was easy for the Peace Conference to brush this problem aside, by agreeing on the quick compromise solution. In any case, the compromise agreed to in the Territorial Committee in March did not last. Prekmurje was even-

tually assigned to Yugoslavia; and the problem of Maribor had an excellent chance, in August 1919, of also being solved by plebiscite.¹⁹

It has also been alleged that the Carinthian question can only be understood in connection with the Balkan politics of the major European powers. More or less as compensation, France and England, which had to oppose Italy in the Balkan conflicts, allowed Italy to successfully dispute Yugoslav territorial claims along its northern borders.²⁰ Italy, which was anti-Yugoslav on principle, was certainly of great assistance to Austria at the Conference in Paris, as well as being of practical help in Carinthia, stationing troops there and closely watching Yugoslav military movements. The Italians were not only against any increase in Yugoslav territory on principle, but also felt that the Yugoslav claim to the Klagenfurt Basin menaced Italian interests in a specific manner: namely, that if Yugoslavia should acquire control, either in Carinthia or at Jesenice/Assling (in the Sava Valley south of the railroad tunnel through the Karawanken), the direct railway connection between Trieste and Austria would be broken, with the result that Italian goods would be subject to customs examination and tolls by a third (non-Italian, non-Austrian) power. Nevertheless Italy, under certain conditions regarding her railway interests, accepted the division of the Klagenfurt Basin and the outright cession of the southeastern part of Carinthia to Yugoslavia. So also did the British and the French. Thus the compensation theory is hardly well-founded.²¹

It has likewise been argued that President Wilson had made up his mind from the beginning to solve the Carinthian question in a way favourable to Austria; and that it was his aim to achieve a balance of power in Europe in order to further U.S. commercial interests.²² But, when he accepted the partition of the Basin on June 4, 1919, he himself was aware of the fact that the vote in Zone A could easily go to Yugoslavia.²³ His experts, Seymour and Day, were disappointed because this solution did not correspond to U.S. principles followed to date, that held to the theory that the economic unity of the Basin should not be disrupted. Seymour wrote that Wilson had arrived at this solution because the Yugoslavs had threatened that they would refuse to accept the U.S. compromise with respect to Rijeka/Fiume, if they did not obtain part of the Klagenfurt Basin.²⁴ Orlando, Italian Prime Minister, stated on June 7, 1919, that, given the then situation, the plebiscite appeared to him useless; in Zone B the majority of the population was Austrian, in Zone A it was Yugoslav; and the result of the plebiscite was therefore, for him, a foregone conclusion.²⁵ Because of the ethnic situation, the Yugoslavs too were confident of victory. The members of the Inter-allied Plebiscite Commission, which came to Carinthia in July 1920, after the ratification of the Austrian Peace Treaty, to prepare for the plebiscite, also seem to have believed in a pro-Yugoslav vote in Zone A.²⁶ Taking all this into consideration, we can in no way regard the Carinthian question, as determined by the Peace Conference, as a foregone conclusion.

Klagenfurt

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POVZETEK

Avtor razpravlja o dveh gledanjih na 'koroški problem,' kot sta prevladovali v letih 1919-1920: eno sloneče na etnografskem principu, po katerem bi bila področja, za katera je šlo, izročena Jugoslaviji; drugo poudarjajoče ekonomski princip, po katerem bi ostal celotni celovški bazen nedotaknjen del Avstrije. Potem ko pretrese stališča prizadetih delegacij in nekaterih posameznih politikov na pariški mirovni konferenci, še zlasti stališče Milesove komisije, avtor zavrne tezo, da so velesile privolile v avstrijsko zahtevo po Koroški kot 'odškodnino' za izgube, ki jih je Avstrija utrpela na Štajerskem, ali pristale na italijanske zahteve po reparacijah za njihove izgube na Balkanu. Avtor tudi zavrača tezo, po kateri naj bi ameriški predsednik prišel na konferenco z že pripravljeno odločitvijo. Rešitev 'koroškega problema,' do katere je prišlo, ni bila neizogibna; nasprotno, 'gospodarski pricnip' je bil gotovo v veliki meri odločilen pri končnih volitvah; ameriška delegacija je pravilno ocenila položaj in točno predvidela izid plebiscita. Stališče predsednika Wilsona je bilo odločilno za sprejem plebiscita.