

## COMMENTARY: THE 1920 CARINTHIAN PLEBISCITE

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In this short paper I wish to add to the presentations by Drs. Fräss-Ehrfeld and Moritsch, and touch upon certain questions concerning the problem of the 1920 Carinthian plebiscite from the point of view of Slovene and Yugoslav historiography. In the last twenty-five years the issue has been to some extent settled on both the Austrian and Yugoslav side, whereby an ideological discussion with strong political overtones has been superseded by realistic and sober reconsiderations. Not surprisingly, this enables us at least to compare the still-discrepant estimates of the Carinthian minority situation. The offshoot of this relatively new development, it may be added, has been two 1981 German-language collections of papers on the topic.<sup>1</sup>

I think we now have a consensus to the effect that the events of the years 1918 to 1920 can not be considered exclusively from the international point of view. Rather, broader historical, ethnic/national, social and economic considerations have to be taken into account. Unfortunately, only a few of these can be mentioned here.<sup>2</sup>

The end of World War I, with the disintegration of the Habsburg Monarchy on the one hand and the emergence of the new Yugoslav state on the other, represents one of the most profound changes in Slovene history. Despite the development of the Yugoslav Movement between 1917 and 1918, and despite the massive support given to the request that all the South Slavs of the Monarchy ought to unite into an autonomous state unit under the Habsburg crown, the historical development caught Slovene politicians unprepared. Slovenes were thus forced to form their political attitudes alongside the accelerated developments which followed the demise of the Habsburg Empire. "We were children, immature ignoramuses, absolutely unprepared for the events quickly following one another in Europe," later wrote Albin Prepeluh.<sup>3</sup>

There was great naiveté among the Slovene bourgeoisie concerning the state boundaries. They trusted the victorious Great Powers and the principle, proclaimed by them, of national self-determination. The Slovene politicians especially trusted the benevolence of France and the United States, and they believed that the "ethnic boundaries" would be fully respected. The proclamation of the new Yugoslav state of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs [SHS] on October 29, 1918 was accompanied by slogans praising Woodrow Wilson and the principle of national self-determination. In both bourgeois parties they did nevertheless anticipate problems concerning the boundary with Italy, given that the latter had sided with the Entente during the war, and given that it cited the London Agreement in its territorial claims concerning Slovene and Croatian lands. But, at the same time, nobody believed that there would be any problems with the Austrian boundary in the North: they anticipated that it would follow the ethnic boundary line. Thue Anton Korošec, who, representing the National Council, had visited Switzerland and France on December 3, 1918, announced upon his return that the Slovenes enjoyed the full support of the Entente concerning their northern border.<sup>4</sup> Contingency plans for the Austrian border were actually still in the making while the Peace Conference was already in progress,<sup>5</sup> whereas the local political process in Ljubljana vacillated rather clumsily in its attitudes and equivocated constantly. The Belgrade governments in the years 1918 - 1920 were not of much help either, preoccupied as the Serbian and Croatian politicians were at the time with the

Bulgarian, Romanian and Italian borders; the border with Austria for them remained for the most part a matter of secondary importance.

It was thus inevitable that the naive trust placed in the Great Powers should quickly change into somber disappointment. The historiographical evaluation of the Great Powers' attitudes concerning the Carinthian problem during the 1918 - 1920 period have now been largely reconciled on the Austrian and the Slovene sides. Both sides, for example, recognize that Italy supported German and Austrian interests only, whereas France stood squarely on the Yugoslav, viz., Slovene side with respect to the Carinthian issue. Greater discrepancies are encountered concerning the evaluation of the U.S. role in general, and more specifically of the Mission led by Lt.-Col. Miles in Carinthia. Slovene historians believe that the Miles Mission acted squarely against Slovene interests, since it was subject to German influence in Celovec/Klagenfurt, in Gradec/Graz, and in Vienna. For example, during its mandate in Carinthia it was accompanied by Capt. Peter-Pirkham, who, due to his monopoly of the English language, acted both as Austrian envoy to the Mission and as interpreter for both the Austrian and Slovene sides. Professor Grafenauer, for example, established in 1969 that the Miles Mission had already during its stay in Carinthia actually consented to the Austrian request, viz., that Carinthia should remain undivided, and that the border should follow the Karavanke/Karawanken mountain range. Only one member of the Mission, Professor Kerner, dissented and advanced the proposition that the border ought to follow the River Drava/Drau. Despite the criticism addressed to the work of the Miles Mission, the former idea was later adopted by the U.S. delegation at the Paris Peace Conference.<sup>6</sup>

As is apparent from Claudia Fräss-Ehrfeld's paper, her evaluations do not differ substantially from Grafenauer's. Under the influence of the Miles Mission the U.S. delegates had dropped their original ideal of a "just" ethnic demarcation, and replaced it with the concept of an undivided Carinthia, the idea being derived from considerations concerning geographical and economic unity. This was objected to in 1920 by the Slovene bourgeois politicians, who emphasized both the incompatibility of such a solution with Woodrow Wilson's principle of national self-determination and the betrayal of Slovene expectations. The behavior of the Miles Mission, I should add, was likewise condemned by the French. The French envoys were already in February 1919 reporting from Carinthia to their headquarters in Paris. They observed that the U.S. envoys themselves could not have failed to notice the obvious fact that the territory in question was populated predominantly by Slovenes. Nevertheless, under the influence of their German entourage, they continued to question members of this population not about their feelings of ethnic identity but about their national, i.e., state preferences. According to the French sources, Mr. Coolidge and Colonel Miles even "endangered the interest of the Entente."<sup>7</sup>

It is this framing of the question that represents the key problem of the Plebiscite, according to contemporary Slovene historiography. The Plebiscite did not determine the ethnic feelings of the population in question. Rather, it tested preferences for the Austrian State versus preferences for the Yugoslav State. It is only logical, therefore, to keep asking, not why the Plebiscite happened in the first place (although such a historical reconstruction is likewise an unavoidable and urgent need in the historiography), but rather why the majority of Slovenes in Carinthia opted for the Austrian state, thus severing themselves from the Slovene ethnic whole. It has for some time been clear that the outcome of the Plebiscite cannot be explained merely by irregularities, by pressure, or even by violence, as was attempted by certain Slovene authors

in the decades following the Plebiscite. In current Slovene historiography it has generally been accepted that the violence started on both sides almost simultaneously, and that certain actions on the part of the Yugoslav Army during its occupation of Carinthia in May and June 1919 negatively affected the attitudes of the Carinthian population vis-à-vis Slovene and Yugoslav authorities. Concerning these attitudes inside the Plebiscite Territory and in Zone A, which was transferred in June 1919 to Yugoslav administration, a special meeting was held in Ljubljana, known by the name "Carinthian Enquête." There, the situation was seen with anxiety, and proposals were advanced for the improvement of the above-mentioned administration, and the abolition of certain irregularities.<sup>8</sup>

I should like to correct Fräss-Ehrfeld's position here, since such seems to be the *communis opinio* of Yugoslav historiography today, to the effect that the Slovenes who voted in the Plebiscite did not opt in terms of their feelings of ethnic identity. Rather, they opted for Austria as their national-political preference. The situation was such that the question of their ethnic identity was never even raised. Both states competing for their votes promised them an undisturbed, free ethnic life. This holds true for Austria just as much as for Yugoslavia, as is evidenced by one of the election posters, which read: "SLOVENES! LET US STAY IN CARINTHIA! YOU WILL SEE THAT WE SHALL OUTLIVE EVEN THE SLOVENES IN SLOVENIA!" Another poster promised: "WE SHALL SPEAK OUR DEAR MOTHER-TONGUE UNDER AUSTRIA IN AN UNDIVIDED CARINTHIA. WE SLOVENES SHALL STAY."

The reasons for over 10,000 pro-Austrian votes in 1920 ought not to be sought in the population's ethnic orientation. Rather, several other factors must be taken into account, among them: the absence of any long-term tradition of pro-Yugoslav politics in Carinthia; the religious prejudices against an Orthodox Dynasty; the progressive political orientation; and the great social security in the Austrian republic.

Concerning the prevailing and decisive motives for the pro-Austrian votes, there are in Slovene historiography two predominant theories. According to the first, held by the Ljubljana historian Janko Pleterski, the Plebiscite was decided by Slovene voters who voted under the influence of Austrian social democracy, which unequivocally favored a pro-Austrian decision; this policy, which was that of the social democrats and was identical to the stand of the bourgeois parties, deliberately de-emphasized the ethnic criterion. Pleterski established that 5,900 Slovene votes could be attributed to the impact of social democracy, given that the Plebiscite results in October 1920 and the Austrian Parliamentary election of June 19 1921 resulted in similar numbers with respect to Slovene voters. According to Pleterski the result would thus have been essentially different if the Austrian Social Democratic Party had maintained its pre-War policy, i.e., of leaving the issue to individuals, without trying to influence their decision. In that case, the vote would very likely have ended in favor of the SHS.<sup>9</sup>

In 1980 Andreas Moritsch advanced the second theory, which, contrary to Pleterski's, emphasized the decisive impact of the farmers' pro-Austria vote. According to Moritsch, economic factors have so far been neglected in favor of political ones. Thus, the workers and the industrial entrepreneurs could not have opposed joining the SHS, since they were already gravitating economically to the market south of the Karawanken. For the peasant population, however, the boundary line in Southern Carinthia would have cut them off from their markets in Beljak/Villach and Klagenfurt. Moritsch thus analyzed the Plebiscite results in certain Southern Carinthian districts, and arrived at the conclusion that the Plebiscite outcome was decided by

Slovene farmers. He also drew attention to the fact that in Austria after the War, in contradistinction to the SHS, there was a great shortage of food, which enabled the farmers to sell at higher prices.<sup>10</sup>

In this short commentary we can not decide on the validity of these two theories. Both probably need further verification and more specific clarifications. Nevertheless, Moritsch's theory can not be seen as unpersuasive. The troubles connected with economic reorientation towards the other side of the Karawanken were well understood by the Slovene farmers, after the closing of the demarcation line during the Yugoslav administration of Zone A. The above-mentioned "Carinthian Enquête" of August 1919 dealt with the closing of the demarcation line and the need for the reinforcement of economic ties; this is evidenced by the fact that the participants dealt with economic issues and the economic organization of Zone A. The strength of the economic persuasion was also well understood by German propagandists, who included the following slogan on their propaganda posters: "SEVERANCE FROM KLAGENFURT AND VILLACH MEANS OUR ECONOMIC DEATH. WE DO NOT WANT TO WITHER IN THIS FASHION. WE WANT TO LIVE AS FREE SLOVENE CARINTHIANS IN A UNITED AND PEACEFUL CARINTHIA."

Slovene historiography has not said its last word on the question of the Carinthian Plebiscite; there are still many unanswered questions. Nevertheless there seems to have been established, as a common denominator, that the Slovenes who voted for Austria in 1920 so voted in the conviction that their ethnic autonomy and future freedom would be respected and favored by the Austrian state. After all, this freedom and undisturbed ethnic life had been promised them explicitly by German propaganda. Thus, their Plebiscite vote had emphatically not been a vote against their people or nation, or for some abstract German or Austrian national identity. Their vote was cast in plain faith that their ethnic identity in Austria would not be endangered.

From the point of view of later events, well-described by Moritsch, this decision, however, turned out to have tragic long-term consequences. The process of violent Germanization, which had been begun in the last decades of the Habsburg Empire, continued with relentless force. Immediately following World War II the English historian A.J.P. Taylor wrote the following about the political attitude of the First Austrian Republic vis-à-vis the Slovenes:

The Austrian Republic is German also in deeds: it continued the campaign against the Slovenes in Carinthia which had been begun by the German nationalists before 1918. In fact, Austrian rule in this way surpassed Hitler's. The Austrian census taken in 1934 allowed the existence of only 26,122 Slovenes. The Nazi census taken in 1939 acknowledged 45,000. It is not surprising that in 1945 the Nazi Gauleiter handed over Carinthia voluntarily to a social democrat. This new government announced: "It considers its first task to be the preservation of a free and indivisible Carinthia".<sup>11</sup>

The 1920 Plebiscite thus indeed preserved the unity of Carinthia, but it also fatally marked the life of the Slovene ethnic community on Carinthian territory. By excluding the ethnic preference and inquiring about national preference it made a free and democratic decision impossible. It thus relegated the principle of national self-determination, and was transformed into its own mirror-image, through the increasing pressures of Germanization in the years 1920 to 1945.

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## REFERENCES

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2. The positions concerning the Carinthian Plebiscite taken by Slovene historiography are best reviewed in the collection of papers *Koroški plebiscit* (Ljubljana, 1970).
3. Albin Prepeluh, *Pripombe k naši prevratni dobi* (Ljubljana, 1938) 143.
4. This statement was reported in both the leading Slovene newspapers, *Slovenec* and *Slovenski narod*, December 3, 1918.
5. See Bogo Grafenauer, "Slovenska Koroška v diplomatski igri leta 1919," *Koroški plebiscit* 295-378.
6. Grafenauer 316-324.
7. *Archives diplomatiques, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Paris. Europe 191-1920, Autriche* 53, fol. 244-249.
8. Tone Zorn, "Prispevek k vprašanju jugoslovanske uprave v coni A," *Koroški plebiscit* 259-263.
9. Andreas Moritsch, Marjan Sturm and Sigilde Haas-Ortner, "Die wirtschaftlichen und sozialen Verhältnisse in Südkärnten und die Volksabstimmung 1920," Rumpler 99-116.
10. Quoted from p. 178 in: A.J.P. Taylor, "The Austrian Illusion." *From Napoleon to Stalin. Comments on European History* (London, 1950) 176-178

## POVZETEK

*Razprava med jugoslovanskimi in avstrijskimi zgodovinjari o Koroškem plebiscitu 1920 je v zadnjih letih dosegla pomemben napredek, kar med drugim razkrivata skupna zbornika ob njegovi šestdesetletnici (cit. op. 1). Pri vlogi antantnih držav se razlikujejo ocene politike ZDA, ki je po mnenju jugoslovanskih zgodovinarjev v koroškem primeru povsem opustila načelo samoodločbe. Koroški plebiscit namreč ni omogočil demokratične narodne odločitve, saj je povpraševal po zaželjeni državni in ne narodni pripadnosti (republika Avstrija pa je Slovincem obljubljala nemoten narodni razvoj). Slovenci so se v tem smislu odločali za Avstrijo v prepričanju, da njihova narodnost ni ogrožena: po Janku Pleterskem jih je k takšni odločitvi vzpodbudila predvsem avstrijska socialna demokracija, po Andreju Moritschu gospodarski razlogi in strah pred izgubo tržišča za kmečke izdelke. Obe tezi sta lahko predmet razprave: z zgodovinskega vidika je pomembneje, da je avstrijske obljube slovenski narodni skupnosti grobo zanikal že razvoj v dvajsetih/tridesetih letih.*