

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 176

“1919 – Austria-Hungary I”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The more I think about the President’s declaration as to the right of “self-determination,” the more convinced I am of the danger of putting such ideas into the minds of certain races. It is bound to be the basis of impossible demands on the Peace Congress, and create trouble in many lands...The phrase is simply loaded with dynamite. It will raise hopes which can never be realized. It will, I fear, cost thousands of lives. In the end it is bound to be discredited, to be called the dream of an idealist who failed to realize the danger until too late to check those who attempt to put the principle into force. What a calamity that the phrase was ever uttered...A man, who is a leader of public thought, should beware of intemperate or undigested declarations. He is responsible for the consequences.

U.S. Secretary of State Robert Lansing.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 176. 1919 – Austria-Hungary, part one.

This episode begins the series I call “The History of the Twentieth Century 1919 World Tour.” In the year 1919, the Paris Peace Conference is in progress, working out the series of treaties that will officially end the Great War. The current world situation poses a challenge for me as I relate to you the history of the twentieth century. I try to make this podcast a chronological telling of the story of the century, as far as that is possible, and I try not to reference historical events that lie in the future of our narrative. I find it’s easier to understand the attitudes of people in a given historical moment if we clear our own minds of our hindsight and look at the world as they did, with only the information available to them.

But the Paris Peace Conference is a special case and I think it requires a slightly different approach. So I’m going to opt for a topical rather than a chronological series of episodes that will

examine the end of the war, the peace treaties, and their impact on the world. The organizing principle will be geographical. That is, I'm going to take you on a tour of the world of 1919, to talk about the war, the peace, and the aftermath and how it affected that nation or region over the half-decade or so that followed. So roughly 1919-1924, though I may sometimes stretch things a little.

I expect this will take about thirty episodes. My primary goal will be to examine the impact of the Great War and the peace that followed, but I have another goal, which is to give myself an opportunity to cover those parts of the world that I haven't gotten to yet or have touched upon only lightly so far. My ambition for this podcast has always been to take a world perspective on twentieth century history, and in the past four years, I've learned how hard that really is. I'm limited by my own educational background, by the sources available to me, and by the fact that English is the only language I can read well enough to get through a history book. Inevitably, the podcast is going to have a certain bias toward English-speaking nations in general and the United States in particular, since that's my home country. I've come to accept that. And like it or not, the United States is the most important single nation in the history of the twentieth century; indeed, it has been called "the American century," so that's unavoidable no matter who does the narrative.

Still, bias may be unavoidable, but I can at least try to minimize it. I take pride in the fact that so many of you live outside the United States. I take that as a sign my listeners in other countries have noticed that I'm at least trying. But it's also true that there are important nations and regions of the world that I've neglected so far, and I hope this "world tour" will help correct that. I have received a number of emails since I began the podcast from listeners in various countries asking me, every one of them very politely, when am I going to talk about their country? Well, if you are one of those who have asked, here you go. I hope I don't disappoint you.

We're going to begin our world tour in Austria-Hungary. Perhaps I should say "the region formerly known as Austria-Hungary." You might think that Germany would be a more logical starting point. Those of you who have read ahead in the history of the twentieth century already know that the Treaty of Versailles and its effect on Germany are going to be major topics going forward. But I want to set those questions aside for a while—I'm thinking, in fact, that I may save Germany for the very end of the tour—and in the meantime, I will focus on other topics, such as how the Allied powers handled the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy and what emerged afterward.

I have narrative reasons to begin here. If you think back to the first episode of the podcast, I talked about the decline of empires as one of the most important developments of the twentieth century. Arguably it is the single most important development. The dissolution of Austria-Hungary and the problems that created are examples of a story we are going to hear told again and again over *The History of the Twentieth Century* as other empires fall, so it's worth paying close attention and taking note of what's happening here.

Managing the end of a multi-ethnic empire entails a set of problems we're going to see recur as other empires collapse, and especially in this new post-war world when the guiding principle is "self-determination of peoples." The victorious Allies have committed themselves to this principle, at least with regard to *European* peoples. How the Paris Peace Conference will deal with *non-European* peoples is a question I'll defer to later in the podcast. But at least within Europe, and certainly within Austria-Hungary, the new world order is supposed to be based upon this principle. No longer will potentates be permitted to trade peoples back and forth as if they were comic collectors trading their prize books at a convention or on eBay. From now on, these peoples will choose for themselves who will rule them.

But what do these high-sounding words actually mean? What constitutes a "people," what in 1919 they often called a "race," and what today we might call a nationality or an ethnic group? In 1919, the prevailing ethnographic wisdom was that ethnicity was inherited, hence the use of the word *race*, and that it was revealed by language. Thus, if you want to know what ethnicity a certain group of people is, just ask, who are their ancestors and what language do they speak? In our day, we take a more nuanced view of ethnicity as a product not only of language and ancestry, but of religion, nationality, culture and custom. Also, today we are more open to the idea that people can have overlapping ethnic identities, such as being both British and Scottish. Also, in our time we are more likely to view ethnicity as a conscious choice, at least to some degree, rather than as an immutable inherited characteristic.

But be aware that in 1919, the harried Allied representatives at the Paris Peace Conference are going to be burdened with the responsibility of arbitrating dozens of international disputes that are not going to permit them to take deep dives into the cultures and traditions of parts of Europe they know little about. So language is going to be their lodestone.

Apart from the difficulties of identifying a nationality or ethnic group and then deciding who is a member of that group and then deciding who speaks for that group, there is the further problem of where to draw the borders. Individual human beings can be members of this or that nationality, but nations are defined by borders, and human beings do not sort themselves according to neatly drawn lines on a map.

There is no place on Earth where this problem is more acute than Austria-Hungary. Austria and Hungary as nations have each existed for nearly a millennium. Both of them have included ethnic minorities within their borders from the very beginning, and people move around more fluidly than borders do. This is especially true of the dominant ethnic group of a kingdom or empire; in this case, you will find German-speakers here and there everywhere in Austria-Hungary, albeit more so in some places than others. Outside their ancestral lands, you are most likely to find German-speakers in cities and towns, because German speakers are the nobility, the landlords, the merchants, the teachers and professionals, and these are townfolk. In rural regions you are more likely to find the poor, the peasant farmers, and these people are far more likely to be people of minority nationalities, even in regions where they are the majority locally. So how

do you put into practice the principle of “self-determination” when you have a province full of people where half the population lives in the cities and towns and identifies with this nation over here, while the other half lives in the countryside and identifies with that nation over there?

This in turn leads us to the third problem posed by the concept of self-determination: a nation has to be economically viable. The example I just gave, in which the residents of the towns belong to one nationality while the rural folk belong to a different one, illustrates this. You could, in principle maybe, separate the towns and the countryside and put them into separate nations, but this would be economically disastrous. The rural folk need to sell their harvests; the town folk need to eat. The rural folk need to shop in the town; the merchants in the town need customers. To put these two groups into separate nations would dismantle the regional economy.

These are the problems that will bedevil the peacemakers in Paris, and we will see examples of them as we observe the borders of postwar Europe redrawn. Let’s get down to cases, and we’ll start with an easy one: Czechoslovakia. What we’ll learn is, even the easy cases aren’t so easy.

[music: “Kde domov můj” (the national anthem of the Czech Republic)]

We’ve already covered the back-story on the creation of the Czechoslovak state up to October 28, 1918. That was the day that Czech political leaders in Prague declared independence and took control of the regional government. After the Armistice, the Hungarian government in Budapest was ordered by the Allies to withdraw its military from the Slovak north of the country. The Czecho-Slovak National Council requested Allied troops occupy Czechoslovak territory, but the Allies didn’t have the troops to spare, so the occupation force would consist of Czechoslovak troops under Allied command.

The delay in getting the Paris Peace Conference going benefited the new Czechoslovakia by giving it time to assemble its new government and military. By February 5, 1919, the day Edvard Beneš appeared before the Allied leaders in Paris to plead Czechoslovakia’s case, Tomáš Masaryk was already back in Prague and installed as the first President of the fledgling republic.

Czechoslovakia’s claims fell on sympathetic ears. By 1919, everyone in the West knew all about the Czechs and the Slovaks and their national aspirations, thanks to the hard work of the Czecho-Slovak National Council and the derring-do of the Czech Legion in Russia. Czechoslovakia was a *de facto* member of the Entente. Czechoslovakia had earned much goodwill among the Allies.

A lot of this had to do with the simple fact that the Czechs have traditionally been the most Western of the Slavic peoples. The Kingdom of Bohemia was part of the Holy Roman Empire and Czechs have deep historical ties to Germany and Austria. In 1919, Czechs are the most educated and economically developed of the Slavs of Central Europe. The Czechs argued that their nation had always valued freedom and democracy and has stood against German autocracy and militarism. In the future, they assured the Allies, Czechoslovakia could be counted on to be a

friend of Western democracy and a bulwark against any resurgent German militarism or the new threat of Bolshevism.

The British, French, and American government officials who dealt with them found the Czech representatives to be polite, reasonable, and accommodating. In other words, quite unlike most of the nations they were dealing with. The UK and the US, however, felt no compelling national interest in a strong Czechoslovakia.

The French perspective was very different. For the French government, the first order of business at the peace conference was safeguarding France against any future threat from Germany. For twenty years, the Franco-Russian alliance had served to keep German ambitions in check. Now that Russia had gone Bolshevik and apparently become hostile to every foreign government, a renewed Franco-Russian alliance appeared out of reach. Thus, French diplomats hoped to create new alliances in Central Europe that would serve the same purpose: nations like Poland, Romania, and the new Yugoslav state. And Czechoslovakia.

The Czech lands of Bohemia and Moravia already had defined borders with Germany and Austria, and the Czechs argued for maintaining these existing historical frontiers. Slovakia was a whole other story. The Slovaks had been subjects of the Kingdom of Hungary for as long as Hungary had existed, about a thousand years. Slovak identity began simply as “the Slavs who live in Hungary.” The very name “Slovak” is derived from “Slav,” because Slavs living in Hungary had no need to identify themselves any further. There had never been an independent Slovak state; the idea only arose during the Romantic nationalism of the 19th century.

Consequently, the line between Slovak lands and Magyar lands within Hungary is diffuse. It’s fuzzy. It doesn’t help that, unlike Bohemia and Moravia, which are encircled by a hairpin of mountains that create a natural frontier, there is no clear geographical divide between Slovakia and Hungary. The rivers in Slovakia flow toward Hungary, and all roads—and railroads—lead to Budapest.

So drawing the line was difficult. It got even more difficult when Hungary experienced a communist revolution in March 1919—more about that in a couple of weeks—and sent troops into Slovakia in an attempt either to forcibly reincorporate it into Hungary, or failing that, to create a Slovak socialist state. Czechoslovakia responded by sending its own military against Hungary, with Allied approval. The final border ran deep into Hungarian territory, granting Czechoslovakia a serious chunk of what used to be Hungary, along with that a substantial number of ethnic Magyars, more than half a million, who now found themselves minority citizens of Czechoslovakia.

In the far eastern end of Slovakia, the Czechoslovak government also claimed a piece of predominantly Ukrainian territory from Hungary on the argument that the Slavic Ukrainians would be better off ruled by fellow Slavs. This had the added benefit of giving Czechoslovakia a land border with friendly Romania. The Allies agreed to this.

This border with Romania was important because the new nation of Czechoslovakia would be landlocked, and much of its long border would butt up against Austria, Hungary, and Germany, three nations likely to be hostile, or at least chilly, toward Czechoslovakia. In an era when tariffs were all the rage, Czechoslovakia could not afford to leave its export economy at the mercy of former enemies.

So having a border with Romania helped. Sharing a border with fellow Slavs in Poland helped, too, except that the questions of whether or not Poland would also be landlocked and how friendly relations would be between Poland and Czechoslovakia were both still up in the air. You'll also hear more about that later, too.

Another border tweak intended to aid the Czechoslovak economy was the city of Pressburg. Pressburg was a majority German city that stood on the bank of the Danube. There was no national or ethnic argument for including Pressburg in Czechoslovakia, but there was an economic one. Pressburg would give Czechoslovakia the economic benefit of a port on the River Danube, and so the Allies approved it. Local leaders in Pressburg tried to get the Allies to agree to Pressburg becoming a free city, on the model of Danzig, even going so far as to propose changing its name to Wilsonovo Mesto, or "Wilson City," but the Allies were unmoved. Pressburg, would henceforth be known by its Slovak name, Bratislava, and would be the seat of the Slovak part of the Czechoslovak government. In our time, Bratislava is the capital of Slovakia.

The Czechoslovak leadership went a little too far, though, when they suggested their nation be granted a corridor of territory on either side of the border between Austria and Hungary. The purpose of this corridor was to give Czechoslovakia a border with fellow Slavs in the new Yugoslav state. This idea was a little too much for the leaders at the Paris Peace Conference and they dismissed it, although those two nations—Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia—would enjoy good relations with each other.

And then there was the question of the borders with Germany and Austria. Here, the Czechoslovak government claimed the traditional borders of Bohemia and Moravia. Some at the peace conference couldn't help but notice that in Hungary, the Czechoslovak government wanted a border drawn on ethnic lines, but in Czech lands, they wanted the historical border.

This makes a difference because Bohemia and Moravia are almost entirely encircled by mountains and this mountain region is almost entirely inhabited by German speakers, who referred to it as the *Sudetenland*, a name derived from *Sudetes*, which is the ancient Latin name for the mountains of central Europe.

The term Sudetenland was only coined in the early twentieth century. Those of you who have read ahead in the history of the twentieth century know that the Sudetenland is going to become a hot topic again in about twenty years' time, but for now, let's focus on the political and economic difficulties the Sudetenland question presents. Remember how there was a strong

backlash among German speakers to the prospect of Czech becoming an official language alongside German in Bohemia? Most of the German speakers in Czech lands doing the backlashing lived in this mountain country along the borders with Germany and Austria. These German speakers lived in communities where most of their neighbors spoke German and Czech was seldom heard.

And they were numerous, accounting for about a third of the population of Bohemia and Moravia. The question of what to do about these lands and the people living on them was a fraught one.

The Czechoslovak government wanted the Sudetenland to be part of Czechoslovakia, though admittedly this flew in the face of the principle of ethnic states and self-determination. For Czechoslovakia, though, these mountain regions made a natural defense against military threats from Germany or Austria. They were also important economically. The Sudetenland contained coal, essential to keep Czech industry going, and was home to important industries. I'm not talking about heavy industry here, like the Škoda Works; these are cottage industries, principally textiles and beer brewing and glassware manufacture and honestly, what else do you need in life?

To sever the Sudetenland from the rest of Czechoslovakia would cripple the new nation militarily and economically. And also, if you *were* going to separate out the Sudetenland, what would you do with it? The most obvious solution would be to transfer it to Germany, but neither Germany nor the Sudeten Germans were crazy about this idea. Sudetenland's cottage industries would have plenty of customers in Czechoslovakia; in Germany they would have to compete with that nation's large industrial firms, and would probably lose out.

From the German perspective, the German government was anxious to remain on good terms with the Allied powers while they were working out their peace terms. In particular, officials in Berlin worried about what sort of territorial concessions the Allies would demand. Alsace-Lorraine was a lost cause, but Germany hoped to preserve its pre-war borders otherwise. An attempt to annex new Austrian territories would surely stir up Allied resentment against German imperialism, maybe even provoke the Allies into demanding territorial concessions elsewhere. Germany was not ready to trade any of its existing territory for the Sudetenland, populated as it was by a people who had never been German subjects and to whom Germany owed nothing.

What about Austria, then? There was an abortive attempt to incorporate the Sudetenland into the new Austrian republic, but this would attach to Austria a curved and twisty strip of mountain territory over 300 miles long, shaped like a left parenthesis, that would be impossible to defend or even to move into or out of without passing through Germany or Czechoslovakia. This idea was about as silly as that Czechoslovak corridor to Yugoslavia.

And there was one more consideration that made Czechoslovakia the least bad option for the Sudeten Germans: stability. Both Germany and Austria were wracked with political instability in 1919. It seemed briefly possible that Germany might even go Bolshevik. Czechoslovakia

promised the Sudeten Germans a free, prosperous, and democratic future at a time when the futures of Germany and Austria were very much in doubt. Czech leaders sweetened the deal by promising that the Sudeten Germans would enjoy freedom of religion and that the German language would have the status of an official language co-equal with Czech in the Sudetenland.

There remained one last vexing border question: the formerly Austrian Duchy of Teschen, as the Austrian called it. The Czechs called it Těšín and the Poles called it Cieszyn, which is relevant because the population of the duchy is about half Polish with the other half a mix of Czechs and Germans. After the Armistice, both Czechoslovakia and Poland claimed Teschen as part of their new nations. It was agreed to leave the Teschen question open, to be negotiated later, and for the interim, a local Polish government was set up in the predominantly Polish part of Teschen, and a local Czech government in the part of the duchy that was predominantly Czech.

Unfortunately, this interim agreement would not last. Poland held elections to its parliament, the Sejm, in January 1919, and those elections included Polish Teschen. The Czechoslovak government protested that this was an assertion of sovereignty over Teschen territory that violated the interim agreement and asked Warsaw not to conduct elections there. Warsaw refused and Czechoslovakia sent soldiers into Teschen to prevent the election, which led to a seven-day war over the territory that left hundreds dead before the Allies imposed a cease-fire.

The final partition of Teschen came in 1920. The Allies did their best to split the necessary hairs. This border dispute may seem trivial and the arguments over it silly, but Teschen contained coal fields that the French very much wanted to see go to Czechoslovakia so that nation would have a sufficient domestic supply of coal. Poland had other sources of coal. More important, with most of Slovakia's transport links running south into Hungary, the one rail line that linked Slovakia to Czech lands ran through Teschen, making that rail line economically and strategically critical to Czechoslovakia. In harvest time in 1919, Slovak farmers had crops rotting in the fields for lack of means to ship them to market. The Czech and Slovak pieces of Czechoslovakia badly needed that rail link, while, again, the loss of the rail line would be no great setback for Poland.

And so the Allies decided that the eastern part of the duchy, including the old city of Teschen, would go to Poland. The new city went to Czechoslovakia. The gas works and the electric generating plant ended up on opposite sides of the border. Crucially, the coal fields and that rail line would be assigned to Czechoslovakia. This solution also meant nearly 100,000 ethnic Poles would find themselves living in Czechoslovakia, despite the Allied commitment to self-determination.

This conflict left a lingering resentment between the two new nations of Poland and Czechoslovakia. Remember that French policy was to cultivate close relations with the new nations of Central Europe as a bulwark both against Germany and Russia. Remember too that Poland and Czechoslovakia collectively represent the three West Slavic peoples. Given their precarious position, wedged as they are between Germany and Russia, they should be natural

allies. They will not be. This quarrel over Teschen will poison the relationship between them, with unfortunate consequences a couple of decades down the road.

In the final analysis, the population of the new Czechoslovak state would be about 48% Czech and 16% Slovak. Ethnic Germans would make up 22% of the population, the second largest in the nation, considerably more Germans than Slovaks. The remaining population would be about 5% Magyar, 4% Ukrainian, 1% Jewish, and about a half a percent Polish.

Overall, that means about a third of the new Czechoslovak state will be neither Czech nor Slovak, with Germans and Magyars being the largest minorities. The new Czechoslovak government assured the Allies and its own nervous minority citizens that their rights would be scrupulously respected and that peaceful Czechoslovakia would become the Switzerland of Eastern Europe, a place where different ethnic groups could live and work together in harmony. And if the new arrangement seemed a bit dismissive of the rights of Germans and Magyars, well, was it not true that Germans and Magyars had oppressed their own minorities for centuries? And were still oppressing a few even today? Surely that had to be taken into account.

And perhaps the new Czechoslovak government, in *Prague* you'll notice, did not grant Slovaks the full autonomy promised in the Pittsburgh Agreement. Czechs tended to look down on the Slovaks as a rustic country folk with few educated leaders, much in the same way the Slovenes and Croats regarded the Serbs. There simply weren't enough Slovak leaders with the education and experience necessary to take on the responsibilities of autonomy, the Czech leadership insisted. Maybe later. Maybe later...

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you all for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Weston for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons help keep this operation going, and with the end-of-year holiday season coming up, allow me to remind you that donations and patronages make the perfect present, for me. It's a gift that always fits, never goes out of style, and you can be absolutely certain I won't return it. If that doesn't fit your holiday budget, may I suggest a rating and review, especially at the iTunes store? That's a gift that anyone can afford.

And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century* as we continue our examination of post-war Austria-Hungary by examining the birth of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. You know it as Yugoslavia. That's next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I'd like to say a word here about hyphens. Yes, hyphens, and to be more specific, I mean the hyphen that might or might not appear in the middle of "Czechoslovak" or "Czechoslovakia," depending on what source you're reading. Those of you who look at the transcripts I provide with the show surely have noticed I've been bouncing back and forth between using and not using the hyphen. It isn't random; it all depends on the context.

The hyphen makes a difference because “Czecho-Slovak” with the hyphen and with both words capitalized, implies an equality between the two ethnic groups, whereas “Czechoslovak” without the hyphen can be taken as granting primacy to the Czech half of the nation. So it matters. Especially to Slovaks.

The Cleveland Agreement of 1915 and the Pittsburgh Agreement of 1918 both used the hyphen, and the Treaties of Versailles and Trianon both used the hyphen, and from 1918 to 1920, most references to the new country followed suit. But when independence was declared, first in Washington and then in Prague, in 1918, the unhyphenated form was used. The provisional constitution of the new republic managed to avoid making a commitment by not mentioning the name of the nation it was the constitution of, which is quite an accomplishment, when you think about it.

When the nation finally got its permanent constitution in 1920, that document officially named the nation the “Czechoslovak Republic,” with no hyphen, and it became known generally as “Czechoslovakia,” also with no hyphen, although die-hard Slovak nationalists in Slovakia and in the United States continued to use the hyphen anyway. Twice in the history of Czechoslovakia, in 1938 and in 1990, the hyphen was reintroduced. On both occasions, it was for the same reason: to appease restive Slovaks who were threatening to take Slovakia out of Czecho-Slovakia. Both times, the gesture failed to prevent a Slovak secession.

[music: Closing Theme]