

Oscar Jaszi's Danubian Patriotism

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Oscar Jaszi's career spans three countries and three epochs—with two interludes in between. Though his relentless search for truth embraces a large segment of time, his actual impact on history was limited. Even posterity has failed to do justice to his life and ideas.

Jaszi was—it can be seen clearer and clearer—a scholar, strongly committed to public life; as well as a politician, deeply committed to scholarship and ethical norms. Our century gave him few chances to fulfill this double role. He was an expert on minority problems in East Central Europe, and became an ardent advocate of a new type of regional—Danubian—patriotism. During the last 80 years, however, East Central European reality has been reluctant to confirm the validity of his rational vision.

To start with, we have to ask: how did Jaszi recognize the importance of the nationality problem? How could he realize the inter-relatedness of the issues of Hungarian national existence and the minority question in Hungary? How and why did he arrive at the idea of a common Danubian patriotism? The answer seems to be obvious. Jaszi's homeland, Szatmár County, had been the land of the Rákóczi and the Károlyis for centuries. It was the land of the Hungarian struggle for freedom from Habsburg rule. Furthermore, it was a frontier region, a place where various ethnic and religious groups co-existed and, sometimes, clashed with each other. It seems evident that, from infancy, he had imbibed an understanding of minority problems. This answer is, however, suspiciously easy. As a matter of fact, in his youth, Jaszi was more interested in social problems than in nationality issues. He was almost thirty when he realized the close connection between social and nationality problems.

"I was the first in Hungary to [elucidate] the relationship between the national state and socialism, and to prove that socialism will not result in the annihilation of patriotism" he claimed in 1906. Contemporary socialists—even Jaszi's best friend Ervin Szabó, the scholar—rejected the "nationalization" of socialism. Jaszi himself soon realized that in backward and agrarian

Eastern Europe, socialism was a remote utopia, and that the first requirement was to free the bourgeoisie from the influence of aristocratic nationalism, and to free the peasantry from the economic remnants of feudalism.¹

Jaszi was rightly proud of being the first—together with his friend and companion-in-arms, Endre Ady—to link the programme for social development with the need for a new patriotism based on democracy. He realized that democracy would be unable to work unless it accommodated patriotism, and it was only through democracy that the nationalism of the Hungarian aristocracy and gentry could be cleansed of its feudal stains. Jaszi did not exclude from his reform programme Hungary's traditional left-wing national opposition either. He believed that he could find in this group the "missing link" which would connect the old Hungary of the *kuruc* freedom fighters with the reformed, democratic Hungary of the future.

Those progressive elements of the opposition who remained faithful to the ideas of 1848 might have accepted Jaszi's programme of democratic reform had Jaszi not wanted to extend democracy to Hungary's minorities. "One cannot make democracy on a fifty percent basis"—he used to say. As long as the minorities do not possess equal rights, as long as they do not have autonomous administrative and cultural rights, it will always be easy to turn them against any Hungarian effort for democracy, as had been the case, with tragic consequences, in 1848.

Jaszi's argumentation was primarily political: it was seemingly based on tactical exigencies of Hungarian national politics. His everyday experiences as well as his investigations of the nature of nationalism convinced him that there were no substantial differences between the Hungarian national idea and that of the minorities: they were all manifestations of one and the same cultural process of human evolution. The minorities had the same right to national existence as Magyars had, all these movements had the same purpose: national autonomy and self-determination.²

Before World War I, Jaszi dedicated himself for years to the study of history and sociology. The result of successful reconciliation of the scholar and the politician was his famous 1912 book: *The Formation of Nation States and the Minority Question*.³ In this work he pointed out that the national movements were powerful enough to create nation-states and, in the process, disrupt artificially created, dynastic empires. This was a law of nature which manifested itself in the process of national development. Therefore, all the endeavors which tended towards the unfolding national cultures are "not immature chauvinism . . . but a vital force without which people cannot survive." This was Jaszi's conclusion in terms of his positivist philosophy.

Jaszi saw the advancement of mankind as a gradually unfolding process. One cannot begin the unification of mankind with internationalism, he used to say. "Mankind has been created in a manner that the road to

internationalism leads through the national path, and to this through the vernacular of masses." From this basic thesis follows that national minorities can be involved in a higher level of culture only through their mother tongue. Any kind of forced assimilation can only impede the desirable process of regional and continental integration. Hungary can get rid of domination by the Austrian bureaucracy and military only through just and fair minority legislation. "Therefore I state that the minority question is the Archimedean point of Hungarian democracy."⁴

Initially, a radical federalist plan for the reorganization of Hungary did not arise from this premise. All Jaszi demanded for the country's minorities was fair administration and jurisdiction, as well as good education, all offered in the language of the nationalities. He did not mention any kind of federation involving the peoples of Hungary before the war, on the contrary, he wanted to maintain the territorial and political integrity of Greater Hungary *tout a prix*. In this sense he was unable to break out from the magic spell of Hungarian nationalism. But in pre-war Hungary there was no person among the Magyars who went—or could go—further than Jaszi, nor did the demands of the national minorities exceed these requisites. The relevant point in Jaszi's activities was not so much the actual formula of any programme of transition, but the new orientation. Jaszi discovered and propagated a new alternative to the nationalist tradition prevailing in Hungary at that time.⁵

During the First World War, Jaszi's political outlook radically changed. As a devoted believer of progress, he discovered some kind of "historical purpose, divine will" even behind the shocking absurdity of the war. Mankind, he believed, was marching toward a higher level of integration and civilization. He was worried that this progress would be hindered as a result of invasion of East Central Europe by tsarist Russia, or through the penetration of the region by Pan-Slavism. As a result, he became attracted to the German *Mitteleuropa* project—for a while. Immediately after the February Revolution of 1917 in Russia, however, he changed his opinion. "After the overthrow of Russian tsarism it is no longer a utopia to coordinate the entire territory of European culture in a united international organization," he wrote in 1918.⁶

Such an organization or a narrower Danubian Union was, however, politically unfeasible. We may ask what consideration induced him to accept the idea of such confederation? Did it not stand in sharp contradiction with the basic thesis of his book of 1912, which had regarded the formation of the nation and nation-states almost a law of nature?

Although Jaszi discovered and acknowledged the historical inevitability of the formation of nations, he never glorified the idea of small states, which he called *Kleinstaaterrei*. Particularly not in East Central Europe, under shadow of two colossal big powers. He knew very well—as did

all serious thinkers and politicians in the Danube region: Palacky, Balcescu, Eötvös, or Masaryk—that in this multicultural part of Europe the existence of homogeneous nation-states was simply impossible. Even the smallest state would be mixed ethnically and all these internally divided states would be rather weak in themselves. As a matter of fact, the concept of the *Kleinstaaterei* had always been—and would always be—responsible for their dependence on one or the other of the neighbouring great powers. This situation was one reason why Jaszi offered, in 1918, a third alternative. If under the given circumstances it would be impossible to maintain the supranational monarchy on the one hand, and if its splintering into small states would be undesirable or fatal for the nations of the region on the other, the only acceptable solution would be confederation. Only this could comply with the divergent historical tendencies making for national independence as well as supranational integration. Only this could fulfill the historical task of establishing the cooperation “of peoples who, left alone, would be unable to stand up to the double squeeze of the Germans and the East Slavs.”⁷

There were other motives behind Jaszi’s great plan, too. One can take it for granted that his arguments were influenced by his national sentiments even in 1918, in the midst of national and Central European catastrophe. At the same time, his negotiations with the leaders of Hungary’s ethnic minorities show that he regarded his plan as a basis for discussion, and he was ready to make compromises. He wanted, he wrote later, “to work for anticipating the future” [elébe dolgozni a jövőnek].

History has buried Jaszi’s still-born project for a Danubian Confederation. In the post-World War I years of desperation, Jaszi could do nothing but concentrate on two struggles: a war of words against the counterrevolution in Hungary, and a campaign for a democratic minority policy toward Hungarian minorities in the Successor States. Concerning the latter, he had hopes in the new regimes, particularly that of Czechoslovakia. At the time, his hopes did not seem totally unrealistic, only afterwards did they prove illusory. In spite of these hope-driven illusions, Jaszi soberly warned of the dangers inherent in the post-war reorganization in East Central Europe.

As early as 1920, he returned to the idea of the confederation. In the *Bécsi Magyar Újság* (the Hungarian Newspaper of Vienna), he argued that the problems of Central Europe could be solved only by the establishment of a Danubian Confederation, and that only such a confederated Central Europe could rescue Europe from economic decay and endless power conflicts. The crisis is general, he wrote in the 1921 Christmas issue of the newspaper, but its nest—the *sedes mali*—reside in the Danubian Basin. The problem was Janus-like. While in the old Monarchy there was economic unity and free inter-regional trade, the dynastic supranational state impeded the free national development of the region’s ethnic groups. In the succes-

sor states, however, national sovereignty was realized but economic unity had been shattered. Neither the old regime nor the new post-war system was conducive to Danubian co-existence. "The great problem of the Danubian people is that they ought to reconcile the uncurtailed national independence with the economic and cultural interests of the common Danubian fate." They had to give up economic autarchy in order to preserve their political and territorial sovereignty: "this is the way which leads the Danubian people from disorder and disintegration to organization and liberty."⁸

Historical and political considerations lead Jaszi to the conclusion that little states were obsolete. He wondered whether the renewal of a set of little states could be lasting or would be a transitional and anachronistic phenomenon in a world of "mammoth-states." The only solution was integration and federation. But neither the pre-national dynastic "supra-nationalism," nor the post-national socialist internationalism could provide the form and the ideological basis for a new multinational federation. The feasible way was nothing else but a rational and fair compromise between the Danubian nation-states and their nationalisms. And here Jaszi arrived at an essential discovery: no awareness of common interests or a common fate—a Danubian consciousness—existed in the region. Or, at least, only a very weak one could be found among a handful of educated intellectuals. In the Habsburg Monarchy—Jaszi wrote in his pioneering book on the Habsburg Empire's dissolution—"all the nations lived as moral and intellectual strangers to one another. Both the dynastic epic in Austria and the feudal [one] in Hungary were incapable of creating a sufficiently strong and cohesive state idea. What really did fail was a general civic education based on a common civic ethos." Consequently, the first step toward the Danubian Confederation should be the fostering of a regional community consciousness: a Danubian Patriotism.

From the 1920s on, Jaszi was a Danubian patriot first. He never ceased to explain and interpret the new form of regional patriotism. He always argued the compatibility of democracy and nationalism in a multinational region, and to proclaim the advantages of a confederation held together by the force of humanism and rationalism.

Jaszi's conception was based on the rational assumption that freedom and democracy can create and satisfy the need of the community, (i.e. the national community) for self-realization. Democracy and national existence are, however, two different forms of organized human existence. Although compatible, they can not replace each other. Thus the question arises as to whether the voluntary union of the Danubian peoples can ever be attained through democratic means. Prior to the breaking up of the Monarchy, the Hungarians had closed their minds to any internal national autonomy for the nationalities. After the Treaty of Trianon, the Hungarian Left would have been satisfied even with territorial revisions based on ethnic consider-

ations, but by then the leaders of the successor states would not accept this compromise. What power could have created and held together a confederation of this “Babel” of nations? Reason and understanding and equity? Or the will of the great powers? A centralized dictatorship? History seems to suggest that the dictatorial method could establish a Danubian confederation, but this would not be beneficial, while the democratic approach, although beneficial, seems hardly feasible.

In the course of time, Jaszi also recognized that, in addition to the existing international order and irreconcilable nationalism, there were other inherent obstacles and contradictions in the path of a democratic Danubian confederation. Still, he faithfully adhered to this idea up to the end of his life. The gap between political realities and his rational prophecy, was so enormous that in his last writings even he admitted that Danubian peace, democracy and patriotism did not live but in dreams.⁹

Presumably all men of *Realpolitik* and all serious political scientists are of the same opinion. But the historian cannot safely say that the only reality to be coped with is what has been realized or can possibly be realized. Instead, he feels sympathy for Jaszi’s last sentence on this point: “there are dreams which are stranger and more realistic than any petty games and scrambles of everyday politics.”

EDITORS’ NOTES

- 1 For more details on this subject, see Péter Hanák, *Jászi Oszkár dunai patriotizmusa* [The Danubian Patriotism of Oscar Jaszi] (Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1985), especially pp. 34f. For a succinct overview of the topic see Péter Hanák, “A dunatáji közösségtudat ébresztése” [The Awakening of a Common Danubian Awareness] *Műhely* [Workshop], VII, 3 (1981) 4–20. For Hanák’s sources see the endnotes to his book, pp. 161–79, and those of his article, pp. 19–20.
- 2 Hanák, *Jászi Oszkár dunai patriotizmusa*, pp. 39–46.
- 3 Oszkár Jászi, *A nemzeti államok kialakulása és a nemzetiségi kérdés* (Budapest, 1912); a more recent (partial) edition, edited and introduced by György Litván, appeared in 1986 (Budapest, Gondolat).
- 4 For a more detailed discussion of Jaszi’s book, see Hanák, *Jászi Oszkár dunai patriotizmusa* pp. 47–55, as well as Litván’s introduction to Jaszi’s book (see above).
- 5 Cf. József Galántai’s postscript to Jaszi’s book: *A Monarchia jövője, a dualizmus bukása és a dunai egyesült államok* [The Future of the Monarchy, the Collapse of Dualism and the United States of Danubia] (Budapest, 1918), pp. 123f.
- 6 Hanák, *Jászi Oszkár dunai patriotizmusa* pp. 59–67.
- 7 Jaszi’s ideas were outlined in his book *A Monarchia . . .* (see note 5 above). See also Hanák, *Jászi Oszkár dunai patriotizmusa* pp. 67–74.
- 8 See Hanák’s *Jászi Oszkár dunai patriotizmusa*, especially the chapter “A dunai patriotizmus” (pp. 95–108).
- 9 See the concluding chapter to Hanák’s *Jászi Oszkár dunai patriotizmusa*, “Miért nem. . .” (pp. 148–58).