

## Ambivalent Americans

**The Hyphenate in Recent American Politics and Diplomacy**, by Louis L. Gerson. *Lawrence: The University of Kansas Press, 1964. xxvii + 325 pp. \$6.00.*

PROFESSOR GERSON'S analysis of the role of ethnic groups and leaders in American political campaigns and in shaping United States foreign policy contains a wealth of facts and a few keen insights that make the book valuable for both academicians and political tacticians. Some of Gerson's underlying assumptions and explicit judgments, however, invite challenge by serious students of the American national interest and the efficacy of its expression in contemporary foreign policy.

As Gerson shows, non-German Central European nationalism achieved a greater intensity in the United States than it had in its lands of origin. Emigration lifted the forces of localism and, one may add, Greater Austrian patriotism. Achieving education (frequently beginning with literacy in their own tongues) and political activation during an era of discrimination by older established ethnic groups, the new immigrants became acutely aware of their identity as Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, Hungarians, South Slavs or members of other nationalities. Although Gerson does not say so directly, his account suggests the conjecture that the "feed-back" of European nationalism nurtured on American soil may have been the critical factor that tipped the scales in favor of dissolving the Hapsburg Empire: both by influencing Allied policy in favor of dissolution and by stimulating the demand for that policy among the people at home.

In tracing the inter-action of governments, ethnic groups, and political exiles during World War I, Gerson recalls a number of interesting and forgotten sidelights. For a while, it appears, the Wilhelmstrasse took seriously the possibility of a German-American uprising in the event of conflict between the United States and the Reich. Although the strong "anti-hyphen" plank in the Democratic platform of 1916 tended to alienate German-Americans, Theodore Roosevelt drove many of them back into Democratic ranks with his attacks on "those professional German-Americans who seek to make the American President in effect a viceroy of the German Emperor." Those accustomed to simplifications of history will be surprised to read Secretary Lan-

sing's reaction to the Wilsonian slogan of self-determination: "It will raise hopes which can never be realized. It will, I fear, cost thousands of lives. . . . What a calamity that the phrase was ever uttered! What misery it will cause!" Self-determination, Colonel House wrote during the Peace Conference, "has become a craze and in many instances ridiculous."

Although Gerson acknowledges the truism that "we are a nation of immigrants," some of his judgments seem to reflect the assumption that Americans of continental extraction are "hyphenated" in a way that Anglo-Saxons are not. He thus interprets German-American politics in World War I, typified by Professor Münsterberg's letter of November, 1914, to President Wilson, as patently destructive of American national unity. In relating a discussion between Lord Grey and Colonel House concerning pro-British committees in the United States, however, Gerson fails to discern the fact that Grey was asking for and apparently receiving permission for a degree of intervention in American politics considered wholly objectionable when attempted by the Germans.

Gerson's analysis is projected against a simplistic version of history which accepts the foreign policies of Wilson and F. D. Roosevelt as more or less synonymous with the national interest. He treats the neutrality policies of German-Americans and their supporters in both World Wars as thinly disguised alien nationalism, ignoring the fact that there were in both cases excellent, purely American reasons for avoiding belligerency and promoting a compromise peace. The advent of World War II is pictured as "brazen aggression" threatening "the whole structure of world order and peace which had been proclaimed at Versailles. . ." That the Peace of Versailles was the primary, if not the immediate cause of World War II, Gerson brushes aside as irrelevant.

The otherwise enlightening account of Soviet efforts to mobilize Slavic-Americans is marred by uncritical acceptance of the Benesist view of Czech-Slovak relations. Gerson describes the wholly autochthonous Slovak Republic as a "Nazi puppet regime" and cites Carpatho-Russian resentment against "the traitorous action of Tiso," without either specifying the nature of this "action" or indicating any commitment of Tiso's to the Carpatho-Russians that he might have betrayed. (This reviewer is not aware of any such commitment.) That Tiso, faced with a *de facto* choice of Slovak independence or annexation by Hungary, chose the former, can hardly be described as treason to anyone.

There is much truth in Gerson's detailed story of the use and misuse of "liberation" as a vote-getting theme in recent campaigns. In 1952, he tells us, "Truman accused [Dulles] of willingness, despite knowledge of 'the precarious situation the world is in . . . to have the Republican Party, and the Republican candidate, say things that increase the risk of war, simply in order to get votes.' But at the same time, Stevenson, Truman, and the Democratic Nationalities Division offered another—milder—brand of liberation." As Gerson rightly observes, disappointment at Republican failure to conduct a policy of liberation as promised was instrumental in returning large numbers of ethnic voters to the Democratic fold in 1956 and 1960. To many politicians, "liberation" was nothing more than an election gadget.

Gerson is wrong, however, in concluding from misuse of the "liberation" theme that serious attempts to free the enslaved peoples by means other than war would be utopian or contrary to the national interest. His deprecating treatment of Captive Nations Week (which includes a quoted comparison with National Hot Dog Month) betrays a superficial understanding of the dynamics of political struggle as well as refusal to face an American national responsibility—since it was American-dictated strategy in World War II that resulted in enslavement of Eastern European peoples. Gerson fails to see the necessity of liberation as the cornerstone of any foreign policy which is to rise beyond more or less elaborate forms of temporizing. His dismissal of practical proposals for taking the initiative in foreign policy as mere ideological shadow-boxing manifests "the realism of defeatism": a lethal variety.

One can agree without difficulty with Gerson's rather vacuous conclusion that "the real issue is not whether an ethnic vote exists, but what it is used for . . ." A valid doctrine concerning the role of the American aware of his ethnic heritage depends, however, upon a clear concept of what America really is. Here Gerson affords us little guidance: he seems to assume that the unquestioned goal is total assimilation (to what, he does not say) and that any pluralism must stop at the water's edge. Self-analysis, however, will suggest that the American nation, whose strength lies in diversity, is an entity radically different from monolithic European nations such as the Danes or the Slovaks, and that policies expressing American character must reflect the European background. Admittedly, there is the problem of reconciling the objectives of different groups: there is a need for cultivating "European unity" among ethnic groups in America. But

by treating the ideal and emotional concerns of citizens of continental origin as at best non-American, Gerson slips into the unconscious assumption, common to recent immigrants going through a "200%-American" stage, that the Wasp (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) is the true American, and that we all ought to become Wasps as soon as possible.

Reviewed by KURT GLASER

### *Frost: The Poet and the Man*

*Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, edited by Lawrance Thompson. *New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964. lxiv + 645 pp. \$10.00.*

IN INTRODUCING this collection of Frost's letters, Lawrance Thompson quotes a remark of the poet's by way of warning: "I have written to keep the over curious out of the secret places of my mind both in my verse and in my letters to such as you [p. 385]." The warning deserves every reader's consideration, not only, as Mr. Thompson astutely argues, because it notifies us to expect role-playing and like defensive indirections, but because it stands as an admonition to consider just what, in reading Frost, we seek. "A subject," the poet continues, "has to be held clear outside of me with struts and as it were set up for an object. A subject must be an object. . . . It would seem soft for instance to look in my life for the sentiments in the Death of the Hired Man. There's nothing to it believe me. . . . The objective idea is all I ever cared about [p. 385]." An earlier letter offers another version of the same idea. "I'm never so desperate for material that I have to trench on . . . the private . . . nor on the personal. . . . A little in the first to manipulate is all I ask. My object is true form—is was and always will be—form true to any chance bit of true life. Almost any bit will do [p. 361]."

Yet in Frost, as in Byron, the pull toward biographical interpretation is abnormally strong. Despite himself, Frost has fostered the habit of reading his poems as parts of a life record. Like Yeats and Eliot, he was engaged by the need to make his art and his life one; and he believed that the most convincing principle of unity was his own character. Byron exists for most of us today as a person of great importance and little interest. If we follow Frost's lead and seek, primarily, to discover what