

A CHEERFUL CHRISTMAS MESSAGE.

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(ABRIDGED.)

Christmas this year in Central Europe will be the brightest Noel these countries have seen in many a long year. Everywhere, except in Russia, conditions are better than last year, particularly among the children. Mass starvation has largely disappeared, infant health has steadily improved, and the older children are healthier and better nourished than at any time since the end of the war.

Many millions of money for the relief of child-suffering have been poured into European countries during the past three years, by various foreign organisations. They have had their effect, and there is no denying a great improvement in the general situation. An American Christmas will still be celebrated this year at 500 Red Cross child-health stations in a dozen European countries but this relief work has reached its final stage, except in Russia, and the middle of the coming year has been fixed for the withdrawal of the last medical and relief units of the American organisation.

While there are still many children suffering from malnutrition and undernutrition in Central Europe, it may be said that there is practically no starvation in the same sense as has been reported in Russia. Among the refugees who still crowd many localities, there are still considerable groups of children whose families have no means of support, and who are therefore dependent on charity. But these groups, speaking comparatively, are not large, and under normal conditions could be readily absorbed.

Excluding these groups of refugees, and again always excluding Russia, the general trend during the last three years has been one of steady and gradual improvement. The impressions of a trained health worker among the children even of stricken Austria or Poland, where conditions were originally the worst, is that to-day the children are beginning to approach the status of children in other countries. They have a more comfortably-fed appearance, and they begin to laugh and play like other children.

Central Europe as a whole is not yet self-supporting, but food supplies are more plentiful and reserve stocks are larger than at the Christmas season a year or two ago.

The chief difficulty to-day in the Central European countries is an economic one. In the case of persons living on small middle-class incomes, on savings or on war pensions, the economic burden of inflation is almost unbearable, and the children of such families do not get enough food to enable them to get "back to normalcy." However, such cases are not in general subjects for foreign relief, but must be eventually decided by the internal economy of the country.

There is another distinct class of sufferers from present-day economics—the populations of certain isolated communities, especially in the mountainous sections of Austria and Slovakia, where life has been made almost impossible because of political changes which have deprived the inhabitants of their income or market. But with these qualifications, it can be fairly said, that outside of Russia, there is no widespread starvation in Europe at present. The American Relief Administration has recognised this fact by greatly curtailing its plans for child feeding this winter.

During the war there was a rapid decrease in births, which reached its climax in most European cities in 1918. At the same time there was an increase in deaths, even when military deaths were excluded from calculation. But 1919 and 1920 saw rapid decreases in the death rate, and at the same time a really remarkable increase in births. Even in Vienna it is expected that the 1921 birth rate will, for the first time in seven years, show the so-called "natural excess." In France for the first time in many years there is now an appreciable annual increase of from 4 to 8 persons per thousand inhabitants, compared with a pre-war increase of less than one.

General health conditions throughout Central Europe also provide food for optimism. With the exception of the ordinary infectious diseases, such as scarlet fever and diphtheria, there is comparatively little infectious disease. Cholera, which has assumed alarming proportions in Russia, has not crossed the border, except in a few isolated cases.

Tuberculosis increased enormously during the war period. In children it is seen chiefly in the form of bone and gland tuberculosis. Since the Armistice there has been a gradual but steady fall.

There are no outstanding epidemics of smallpox, typhoid or recurrent fever this winter. In the Balkans malaria and intestinal parasites are still abnormally prevalent.

The most serious disease, particularly among children, is anaemia, due to long-continued malnutrition, but the number of children suffering from severe grades of this disease is decreasing. Rickets, due to deficient diet during infancy, has claimed many victims in all the Central European countries, and for years to come, there will be need for orthopedic treatment to correct resultant deformities.

But it is a cheerful Christmas message to say, as one can say squarely and truthfully, that Central Europe is approaching normalcy as far as child-health is concerned. Economic conditions are less favourable. Hospitals, medical schools and dispensaries are having a difficult time to exist, and the purchasing power of money continues to fall terribly. But this is largely a problem to be worked out by the political salons of the world, and is only in part within the scope of the great private relief agencies.

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