**R.W. SETON-WATSON AND NATION-BUILDING CLASHES IN LATE HABSBURG SPACE**

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In the intensive nation-building that occurred across eastern Europe in the first half of the twentieth century, the Scottish historian R.W. Seton-Watsonstands out as one of the major western commentators and experts. In Slovakia his impact has always been recognized. In October 1937 a bronze bust, sculpted by Vojtech Ihriský, was unveiled and stood for a short time on the main square of Ružomberok, “erected with gratitude by the young Slovak generation.” Although Seton-Watson’s death in 1951 was completely ignored by the Slovak press, his reputation has been revived in contemporary independent Slovakia: in academic symposia, through commemoration on postage stamps (2007), and through the re-erection of Ihriský’s sculpture.[[1]](#footnote-1) In contrast, in most other parts of the ex-Habsburg monarchy, Seton-Watson has generally been forgotten or excised from the public memory. In Croatia and Dalmatia, despite his great interest in that region, he has secured no sculpture, street-name or other memorial in the landscape, and merits only minor attention from historians.[[2]](#footnote-2) In Hungary of course he has always been publicly disparaged, as a prime enemy of the nation: he was the man who consciously worked against its interests and integrity, branding Hungary as late as the 1940s “a last survival of feudalism in central Europe.”[[3]](#footnote-3) For only a few Hungarian historians past and present – for example, Domokos Kosáry or Géza Jeszenszky – has he remained a respected and misunderstood figure.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The pseudonyms which Seton-Watson adopted in his early writings after 1900 show us immediately the evolution of his thinking about the Habsburg monarchy. Before the First World War he was *Scotus Viator* (the ‘travelling Scotsman’): a wealthy academic tourist who critically offered solutions for state reform from a western perspective. During the war, as editor of the liberal journal the *New Europe*,he became *Rubicon:* like Julius Caesar he had finally crossed the Rubicon, taking the revolutionary decision that new states should now be built on the ruins of the empire. As he travelled and wrote, especially before 1914, Seton-Watson was always conscious of himself as a foreigner, an outsider, who offered expert advice which many in the region might find hard to stomach.[[5]](#footnote-5) In this vein he did question, in an undogmatic fashion, how far institutions or solutions could simply be transplanted from western Europe to other states or cultures.[[6]](#footnote-6) Yet his was still a British approach, grounded in a firm conception of the nature of Great Britain’s relative stability. Specifically, he had a nineteenth-century western Liberal outlook, believing that the nation-state was the most progressive organizational unit. Slowly he studied how modern nations in Europe were developing, and the best course to ensure continued peace and stability. By 1923 he would write that the “Western doctrine of individual rights [was] the true point of departure” for ensuring stable nations.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Seton-Watson has often been portrayed as a “historian-fighter”, the academic who launched a “crusade for the oppressed of Austria-Hungary.”[[8]](#footnote-8) But as László Péter has incisively noted, there was another key dimension to his thinking. He was never just a “communitarian liberal, pleading the cause of the weak.”[[9]](#footnote-9) He felt that Europe for its overall stability and security needed a strong state or states in the east-central European space. In 1907 in his first major publication about the region, he stressed with some optimism that that state was Austria-Hungary: the monarchy was “the pivot of European politics [….] its disruption would deal a fatal blow to the balance of power” on the continent.[[10]](#footnote-10) He also, while believing Austria-Hungary to be a “diplomatic necessity”, noted how it had evolved historically to match European requirements (forming for example a barrier against Islam). It was in short “a *naturally developed unit* which has long since justified its existence.”[[11]](#footnote-11) For this reason, however, it was vital that the empire continue to reform and evolve so that it might go on playing its key role on the continent. When by 1914 this seemed to be impossible, Seton-Watson judged that the monarchy had to be replaced with new ‘national states’. For a host of other viable nations were emerging and justifying their existence in the same space inhabited by Austria-Hungary.

Much has been written about Seton-Watson, not least the detailed chronological work by his sons on how he engaged with the Habsburg monarchy in his early career.[[12]](#footnote-12) Yet neither this nor most other studies have subjected his views to really critical analysis. Especially there has been little focus on how he conceived the process of ‘nation-building’or how his ideas may have evolved over time. In the following discussion my examples are taken mainly from Hungary and from the South Slav region – Seton-Watson’s key points of reference - in order to address three overlapping questions or themes.

*First*, how did Seton-Watson interpret ‘nation-building’ in the late Habsburg monarchy? What criteria did he use to define these nations and why? Were the criteria wholly ethnic-linguistic, or did he also consider some historic basis for the nation (for example to support the idea of greater Hungary)? How far did he reconcile the different criteria? *Second*, what solutions did Seton-Watson then suggest for the ‘races’ competing in the same space?Should he be viewed as a pragmatist or an idealist or both?After all, the key state experiments which he strongly supported – Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia - would disappear only seventy years after their creation. *Third*, how consistent was Seton-Watson in his theorizing about nation-building? Certainly he always wished for European peace and stability. But how logically did he interpret the national evolutions taking place before the fall of the Habsburgs?

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In terms of explaining nation-building or defining the nation, Seton-Watson never clearly enunciated his own criteria. Rather these were usually ‘unspoken assumptions’ to be found within the main arguments of his writing. However, from the start his own Scottish background firmly informed his outlook: he was immensely proud of his Scottish heritage. As a precocious teenager he had published a slender volume of poetry entitled *Scotland for Ever!*, a reflection of how his own Scottish identity was subtly shaped as a schoolboy when he was educated in southern England. He also easily believed in national characteristics. As he wrote later, “we Celts are intolerant, extravagant and sometimes even vindictive, by comparison with the more placid (often scornfully and infuriatingly placid) Englishman.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Indeed, it was a small step from these common stereotypes to interpreting all nations as having some special ‘ethnic’ base. From 1906, after first visiting Austria-Hungary, he increasingly saw language as the key criterion for measuring national identity, offering the best chances of successful nation-building. Later (by the 1930s) he would define ‘nationality’ more broadly: as *“*something compounded of race, language, tradition and innermost feeling.”The implication always was that nationality was essentialist, yet also metaphysical and intangible: “something physiological and sacred.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

In other words, like most of his contemporaries or like those historical figures he admired such as the Czech patriot František Palacký, Seton-Watson was what we might term a ‘national primordialist.’ Extending from his Scottish roots to what he came to observe across the continent in the early twentieth century, he believed that nations were organic, in a state of constant flux, and usually bearing ancient origins. The Slovenes for example were “a small and ancient race, of vigorous stock and clerical leanings.”[[15]](#footnote-15) The Bohemian nation (i.e. the Czechs), he wrote in 1920, had been “crushed ruthlessly out of existence, lay like a corpse for two whole centuries, and then arose once more to recover, almost unaided, its lost nationhood.”[[16]](#footnote-16) To be precise, there was still a modernist element to Seton-Watson’s thinking about nationality, and he would later suggest that the ‘nationality idea’ was “something quite modern.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Like Benedict Anderson or Eric Hobsbawm many decades later,[[18]](#footnote-18) he identified the late eighteenth century as a progressive turning point when, after the French Revolution, the nationality idea “obtained a fresh impetus”; the following half-century saw nationality “simmering everywhere […] a period of preparation for the rise of national States.”[[19]](#footnote-19) However, as these words imply, his underlying stance had a strong primordial dimension (far more so than some theorizing about formative *ethnie* as a base for the nation).[[20]](#footnote-20) It suggested that the small and large nations beginning to compete in the nineteenth century were simply emerging out of a long hibernation. And while the mass of ‘races’ across Europe were all in different stages of development, some of these organic phenomena had to be addressed immediately since they were challenging and destabilizing the existing political order.

Undoubtedly, Seton-Watson’s training as a historian at Oxford (New College) informed how he perceived nations as primordial organisms. Through an early interest in the “national psychologies” of Germany and Italy (including student visits and vacations there), he was also naturally alert to recent nationalist shifts across Europe, coupling nationality in his mind with notions of progress and liberal democracy.[[21]](#footnote-21) But in late 1905 he also approached the Habsburg realm on the basis of how he understood the contemporary British state and how that ‘federation’ operated. His early works were often peppered with Scottish and Irish comparisons: admiring the degree of Scottish stability while warning of Irish turbulence. The position and historic evolution of Scotland within the British state showed the possibility of a healthy federation, where through careful devolution the small Scottish nation had never lost its identity. In contrast, Ireland before 1914 seemed on the brink of home-rule, a cause with which Seton-Watson wholly sympathized.[[22]](#footnote-22) The Irish struggle would influence how he judged the position of Croatia under Hungarian rule, and it would be reciprocated by those Croats with whom he began to correspond. As one Dalmatian told him, “the history of Ireland resembles so much [the] history of Croatia. We only lack such [a] man as Parnell to lead us.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

It was in November 1905, bearing this mental map of Britain’s largely successful and historic federal structure, that Seton-Watson first visited Austria-Hungary. The timing was crucial. Some historians recently have asserted a large element of ‘national indifference’ across the late Habsburg empire, arguing that many citizens at the grassroots did not view life through a nationalist prism.[[24]](#footnote-24) This is surely true, yet the monarchy in these years was still a state replete with nationalist rhetoric that few could avoid in their everyday lives. Seton-Watson himself wrote that on arrival “the vital question of Nationality met me at every turn and clamoured for a solution.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Most notably, Hungary was in the midst of a constitutional crisis with powerful echoes of the nationalist struggle of 1848; a coalition of political forces was fighting for greater home-rule against an ‘oppressive’ Habsburg dynasty which had imposed upon Budapest an unconstitutional government.[[26]](#footnote-26) The young Seton-Watson’s approach to Hungary was in a long English tradition of admiration for the ideals of Lajos Kossuth and Hungary’s own rich ‘liberal heritage.’[[27]](#footnote-27) Thus, just before visiting the kingdom, he could write in *The Scottish Review*, “let us hope that this phoenix among the nations will once more rise triumphant over every obstacle.” Hungary – the first of the empire’s constituent nations on which he really focused – was portrayed typically as an evolving organism, as an ancient nation (with an ancient constitution) which like Scotland had steadily managed to reinvent itself over the centuries. If the Compromise of 1867 had suited the nation’s requirements at that time, “Hungary, in her natural development, has outgrown those needs.” For the health of the Habsburg empire as a whole, a revision was now “inevitable”, with the Habsburgs abandoning their absolutism and conceding greater sovereignty to the Hungarian people.[[28]](#footnote-28)

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In Budapest, one of the first Hungarians whom Seton-Watson met was Count Albert Apponyi the new minister of education. Apponyi was prepared to concede that Croatia was a ‘nation’ but in the rest of the state, he said, there was only one Hungarian nation co-existent with the state. When Seton-Watson asked whether Hungary might usefully grant local government elsewhere on the basis of nationality – and offered the Scottish example of legal and educational autonomy – Apponyi refused any watering down of the Hungarian state idea.[[29]](#footnote-29) Seton-Watson, having arrived in Hungary with a distinctly pro-Magyar outlook, spent the next six weeks there at a time of election fever and in the aftermath of the nationalist Coalition’s victory. He encountered idealistic theories, on the one hand about promoting a centralised Hungarian state, on the other about restructuring the empire to accommodate national demands (the writings of Aurel Popovici and Karl Renner). He also met Hungarian intellectuals who favoured Magyarization but, notably in Transylvania, some Romanians who stressed their own historic rights and cultural requirements, condemning how Hungary’s Nationalities Law of 1868 had never been properly implemented.[[30]](#footnote-30)

All this evidence was supplemented by a long tour of the Slovak regions in May 1907 when, we might say, Seton-Watson imbibed the grassroots culture of this “most neglected of the Slav races.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Slowly he was forming his own theories about the process of nation-building, or at least what might be practical as a solution of the national problem in Hungarian space. As a Gladstonian Liberal he was alert to any signs of nationalist chauvinism or state oppression, in particular the notorious Csernova ‘massacre’ of October 1907.[[32]](#footnote-32) As a historian he weighed up age-old ethnic characteristics in the Danubian region and set them against more modern national phenomena, noting that “new *Schichten* [layers] of the population are ripe and emerging.”[[33]](#footnote-33) At first he had questioned rather naively why Hungary in the future could not just continue as a multi-lingual state as it had for a thousand years.[[34]](#footnote-34) By 1907 his perspective had shifted towards those who were challenging the existing system: he had had a “conversion to the cause of the nationalities”, believing that their voice must be accommodated by the Hungarian regime.[[35]](#footnote-35) To paraphrase József Eötvös, the non-Magyar races were certainly “awake” with their “distinct personalities” and distinct national cultures.[[36]](#footnote-36)

How then did Seton-Watson interpret what was happening and how logical were his conclusions? Initially he had defined Hungary, like Scotland in Britain, as one historic nation which, on the basis of its supposedly ancient constitution, was pressing justifiably in 1905 for new freedoms within the Habsburg empire. But a year later he understood better the complexity. He wrote in *The Spectator* magazine: “In this country Hungary is too often regarded as a national State like France or Germany. In reality it is one of the most polyglot States in existence [….] Out of a population of nineteen millions, only forty-five per cent are Magyars, and even that proportion includes a large Jewish element and the converts of all the other races.”[[37]](#footnote-37) By 1907 therefore he was still defining greater Hungary as a nation but one composed of competing nationalities or races who were being oppressed by a chauvinist Magyar oligarchy.

The argument was summed up in his major work *Racial Problems in Hungary* (1908) where, alongside much scientific data to prove Magyarization, he interpreted what was happening there in purple prose - as a “war of extermination.”He ignored the realities of any voluntary assimilation, terming it “apostasy” when non-Magyars chose to assimilate and “abjure their native languages and customs”, and explained the overall process as something of a Darwinian struggle.[[38]](#footnote-38) The Magyar clique’s megalomania, and its obsession with national uniformity at all costs, meant that aspiring races like the Slovaks or Romanians were being deliberately suppressed in their “natural evolution.”[[39]](#footnote-39) The danger was that this was destabilizing not just Hungary but disturbing the Habsburg monarchy as a healthy factor in Europe. Seton-Watson’s solution still envisaged the ‘Hungarian nation’ as synonymous with the contemporary Hungarian kingdom, but the Magyar oligarchy should appreciate the real diversity of their nation and abandon Magyarization. After all, he wrote, Magyarization was a utopian idea: seven centuries of English occupation of Ireland had “failed to destroy the feeling of Irish nationality.”[[40]](#footnote-40)

Despite the hyperbole, Seton-Watson’s solution in *Racial Problems* was in fact a compromise and not very radical.[[41]](#footnote-41) He did not propose breaking up historic Hungary nor converting it into a federation of nationalities. He even balked at the idea of “racial autonomy” (a major devolution of power), not just because Budapest would never agree but because this would weaken the Hungarian national unit. Rather, in keeping with the evolving British national model (and we should note that radical Liberal reforms were then being implemented at Westminster), he advocated speedy constitutional reform in Hungary – reform of the narrow franchise, of local government, of education, and freedom of the press. This would reduce the Magyar racial monopoly (“Magyars are dominated by racial prejudices”),[[42]](#footnote-42) and would also reaffirm the 1868 Nationalities Law. Through reform of local government, aspiring nations like the Slovaks would, like Scotland in Britain, adapt and begin to find their rightful place and identity within the larger Hungarian nation. Meanwhile, for practical reasons (as in Britain) a single state language would remain in the kingdom. None of these suggestions, the author stressed, “impair the sovereignty of the Crown of St Stephen or the territorial unity of Hungary.”[[43]](#footnote-43)

As this shows, Seton-Watson in conceptualizing the Hungarian nation did accept its historic lineage and its ancient borders. But he also came to feel that, among the mysterious ingredients that went into nation-building, historic rights or traditions were not an element which should be ‘fetishized’ or assured of absolute precedence.[[44]](#footnote-44) It also followed from his British model that he made a useful distinction between the Hungarian nation, and the Magyar race which was trying to dominate it (in the manner of the English sometimes posing as the overarching and dominant nation in Britain).[[45]](#footnote-45) His liberal credentials led him particularly to condemn the Magyar leaders for conflating their interests with the Hungarian nation and trying to impose their supposed historic national right by “brute force” on other races of the kingdom.[[46]](#footnote-46) When in the following years the Hungarian authorities did not alter their chauvinist course, his natural inclination to compromise shifted. By 1914, after new experiences in the south of the monarchy, his ethnic-linguistic criteria for assessing viable nations had taken full precedence over any historic rights; this naturally inclined him further towards those races or ‘young nations’ who were challenging the status quo of one historic Hungarian nation. And it explains the shift in his own language. With the outbreak of the First World War, he no longer saw Hungary as the ‘rising phoenix’ of 1906 among the European nations. Other nations such as the Czechs were proving their sound credentials as alternative rising phoenixes.[[47]](#footnote-47) Hungary in contrast was a nation which, through evil Magyar leadership was committing suicide and did not deserve to survive as a national unit. As he concluded in November 1914, using the word ‘nation’ in fact to refer to the whole Austrian empire: “Nations, like individuals, sometimes commit suicide; and those who have most earnestly warned them against such a crime are left as mourners in the funeral procession.”[[48]](#footnote-48)

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It was through studying the Southern Slavs in the years before the war that Seton-Watson’s linguistic criteria for defining a nation and for feasible national unity had really crystallized. Starting in early 1909 he began to visit Dalmatia, then Croatia, and finally Bosnia (in May 1910). As with his appraisal of Hungary, his approach to the Southern Slav question was based upon three main premises. Firstly, he wanted a practical solution which would stabilize the Habsburg monarchy in the south and ensure European peace. Secondly, as a western Liberal he abhorred the state repression he had witnessed in Hungary, and continued to advocate compromise with emerging democratic forces who were pushing the “principle of Nationality.”[[49]](#footnote-49) Thirdly, he felt the progressive phenomena of modern nation building could not be stopped. In the wake of German and Italian unification in the nineteenth century, the movement towards South Slav unity had been steadily building and was inevitable in some form. In 1911, in his tome, *The Southern Slav Question*, he therefore wrote with confidence: “Croato-Serb Unity must and will come.”[[50]](#footnote-50)The dilemma for Austrian statesmen – to whom he dedicated the book - was how best to grasp this nettle which was rapidly growing and had the potential to sting all of Europe.

Seton-Watson’s belief in inevitable South Slav unity seems idealistic today and undoubtedly, with the disappearance since the 1980s of ‘Yugoslav historiography’, it has diluted his appeal in contemporary Croatia.[[51]](#footnote-51) However, his convictions at the time stemmed partly from the way that he approached the region after his preceding experiences. He encountered the phenomenon of Croatian nation-building principally via Dalmatia in 1909 where the ideas of the *Risorgimento* were circulating.[[52]](#footnote-52) His main contacts were Croatian politicians like Ivo Lupis-Vukić and Josip Smodlaka, liberal intellectuals who in the spirit of the so-called ‘new course’ in the region strongly favoured Serbo-Croat cooperation and closer unity to promote constitutional reform. Seton-Watson’s particular experience in Zagreb in May 1909 then shaped his tendency to view national stirrings as struggles for liberation against nefarious ‘absolutist’ interests. Having concluded that the Magyars were using brute force against “hydra-headed” national movements in Hungary,[[53]](#footnote-53) he was now an eye-witness at the Zagreb treason trial. There, the Croatian regime of Baron Pavao Rauch was trying to assert its dominance, prosecuting fifty Serbs for treasonous activities while denying the very existence of a Serb ethnicity in the midst of the Croatian nation.[[54]](#footnote-54) Seton-Watson from his own brief presence in the court room called it “one of the grossest travesties of justice in modern times.”[[55]](#footnote-55) Moreover, he was convinced that he was once again witnessing Magyar misrule, for Hungary’s dysfunctional management of Croatia over the past half-century seemed to be at the real root of the problem. He noted “how ineffectual are repression and lack of sympathy in the solution of any national or racial question.”[[56]](#footnote-56)

We can recall that Apponyi himself had conceded that Croatia was “a nation with its own distinctive rights and positions.”[[57]](#footnote-57) Seton-Watson had realized something of this reality when he briefly visited Zagreb in May 1908 and talked to some personalities with strong Croatian nationalist views such as Izidor Kršnjavi. By the time he met Kršnjavi a year later he sensed much better the linguistic bond between Croats and Serbs and suggested that the two races could ideally combine together; Kršnjavi demurred that the two cultures were mutually repellent, but Seton-Watson thought of similar contrasting cultures which did manage to combine within Scotland.[[58]](#footnote-58) It was a fresh example of how he often viewed the region through a British lens. As in Hungary, it inclined him to sympathy with evolving small nations or races, and also gave him a structural model for possible developments. Thus, on his next long visit to Dalmatia in 1910, he told his Croatian hosts at a farewell dinner that “it is easier for a citizen of a small country like Scotland to sympathize with Dalmatia than it is for members of large nations”; he wished Dalmatia the same fortune as Scotland, namely that she would retain her “national identity” within a larger state unit.[[59]](#footnote-59) Here Dalmatia was being defined as a budding small nation, but equally Dalmatia could be one part of a larger national unit.

It is important to note that Seton-Watson in his terminology, while implying that ‘races’ slowly turned into ‘nations’, was not too precise in his differentiations. When it came to the predominant issue of Croatian nation-building and its autonomy within Hungary, there could be natural parallels with Scottish home-rule within Britain. But more often, highlighting a clearly dysfunctional relationship, he was inclined to compare Croatia to the contemporary state of Ireland within the United Kingdom. It even caused one Croat academic to mistake the writer as an Irishman.[[60]](#footnote-60) In the introduction to the *Southern Slav Question*, Seton-Watson wrote that Hungary’s treatment of Croatia was a model of how Ireland should *not* be treated: “A careful study of the relations of Hungary and Croatia would be of the utmost value alike to the convinced Unionist and to the thoughtful advocate of devolution, Federalism or any other scheme of constitutional readjustment among the four sister nations of these [British] islands.”[[61]](#footnote-61) As for Croatia, he hinted that that nation with its persistent traditions across eight centuries might be pacified if Budapest moved to recognize the real spirit of the Hungarian-Compromise (*Nagodba*) of 1868, rendering to Croatia due parity as a contracting party and allowing it a fuller expression of its nationhood. The underlying comparison with Scottish or Irish home-rule was again evident, even if he argued that the character of Croatia’s autonomy within Hungary was *sui generis* in Europe.[[62]](#footnote-62)

Seeking a solution to the problem of Croatian nation-building, Seton-Watson however did not see historic rights as a firm basis which should take precedence anymore than in the case of Hungary. While his study fully explored constitutional and legal traditions to show how Hungary had stolen Croatia’s sovereignty, he stressed particularly the modern “historic evolution” of nationality among the South Slavs, something that effectively trumped any narrow Croatian historic nationalist agenda. In other words, the phenomenon of modern progressive nationalism could not be avoided. When he told one Dalmatian correspondent in 1909 that “the force of circumstance and historic evolution are on your side”, he was emphasizing the inevitable flow towards a new type of national unification in the south of the monarchy. This was based upon his superficial conception that most South Slavs – Croats and Serbs - spoke a single language.[[63]](#footnote-63) Indeed, with typical exaggeration, he went so far as to characterize the southern Slav region as follows: “A wide territory which forms a natural geographical unit and is populated by a homogeneous population, speaking a single language, has been split up by an unkindly fate into a large number of purely artificial fragments.”[[64]](#footnote-64)

It was perhaps surprising, given Seton-Watson’s historical research, that he minimized the historic divisions in the region and prioritized any signs of southern Slav unity. Other commentators at the time characterized such ties as themselves “artificial.”[[65]](#footnote-65) It is true that, on first assessing the situation, Seton-Watson was against including Serbia in any new southern Slav national unit. For Serbia’s recent history (notably the brutal murder of the king in 1903) suggested a certain barbarity, or at least – echoing Kršnjavi’s language – it confirmed a decidedly ‘eastern’ rather than ‘western’ culture which would obstruct easy integration into the nation. His views only altered after Belgrade’s success in the Balkan Wars and the evident enthusiasm for Serbia across Croatian territory in 1912-13. In his mind the once barbaric kingdom was being transformed into “a virile and progressive peasant state” which had long struggled valiantly for liberation from the Turks.[[66]](#footnote-66)

This essentially reinforced Seton-Watson’s overly idealistic belief in a common ‘Serbo-Croat race’ long cemented together by language. He himself in his writings had in fact warned against utopian nationalists like Ante Starčević (1823-1896) who in pursuing their pan-Croatian dreams had ignored what was practical.[[67]](#footnote-67) He therefore now sought ways to make Serbo-Croat national unity a practical possibility within the borders of the Habsburg monarchy. His argument was that these Serbs and Croats were “two kindred races” who were inextricably moving towards national unity.[[68]](#footnote-68) It was a natural unstoppable evolution on the model of Germany and Italy; but there were similarities too to the evolution in Hungary where, as he wrote in 1908, the racial diversity needed to be acknowledged and managed intelligently by those in authority. Since he felt the dualist monarchy as a whole urgently needed restructuring, his solution in *The Southern Slav Question* was ‘Trialism’. Austria should create a third political unit composed of southern Slavs in the south of the monarchy.

Certainly, Seton-Watson’s trialist ideal owed much to those pan-Croatian aspirations which he regularly encountered. But the real idealism came when he gave priority to language as the preeminent criterion for successful nation-building. Here in the south of the monarchy, as in Hungary, there were wheels turning within wheels: new nations were forming within older nations. The mixed-up terminology he used to try to describe this complicated process was often evident. Thus, in describing the “Croat and Serb race” (in the singular), he wrote about “their essential unity as two inseparable elements in the life of a single nation.”[[69]](#footnote-69) In order to maintain stability, the Habsburg authorities – by which he meant Vienna rather than Budapest – needed to be courageously pro-active, lending a helping hand to a budding nation by creating a new political framework in the south. Again, the British model of national development within an overarching state structure came to mind. The Austrians, like the British, should “[take] a delight in creating new nations and combining an endless diversity of race and type with the essential unity which encourages rather than hampers individuality.”[[70]](#footnote-70) The Habsburg annexation of Bosnia in 1908 suggested to him that the monarchy still had the vigour and the imagination to act. By 1914 however he increasingly sensed that Vienna would never take that courageous step - combining idealism and pragmatism – in order to ensure the empire’s stability.[[71]](#footnote-71) Instead, it was Serbia in the wake of the Balkan Wars which had grasped the nettle, leading the moral mission to solve the so-called ‘South Slav Question’. Seton-Watson had long predicted that a Serbian-based solution could only occur through a European war.[[72]](#footnote-72) In terms of nation-building in the region, it implied – as in the case of historic Hungary – that older political or national frameworks would have to disappear in order to make way for new progressive nations in tune with the age.

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As this discussion has shown, Seton-Watson, in seeking to solve the nationalist tensions in the Habsburg monarchy, was certainly always alert to any illiberal oppression of peoples. He also, as László Péter has noted, had a typical liberal outlook in weighing up those forces which seemed to threaten European stability.[[73]](#footnote-73) But a third element in his theorizing was a consistent belief that new nations with a common linguistic core were fast being born in the region. During the First World War, when nuanced argument was increasingly blunted by polemical statements, he would describe the process of such nation-building more forcefully: the phenomenon of nationality was “one of the foundation stones of the new era […..] capable of truly volcanic outbursts.”[[74]](#footnote-74) The sleeping volcano had stupidly been ignored by the rulers of Austria-Hungary. To continue to do so would create even greater instability on the European continent.

Even if Seton-Watson often used imprecise language when writing about ‘races’ or ‘nations’, his solutions, before and after the Great War, were largely consistent. States or existing national units within states should, on the British model, try to avoid any “dull uniformity” and should delight in their racial diversity.[[75]](#footnote-75) Before the war, this meant that in the case of Hungary or any emerging South Slav nation, the practical centralist requirements of state or national unity had to be weighed against the equally practical decentralist requirement to address regional or racial identity (whether Romanian within Hungary, or perhaps Dalmatian within a South Slav unit). After the war, when his sympathies were usually on the side of statesmen in Czechoslovakia or Yugoslavia who needed to stabilize their new states, his approach remained much the same. Even in Masaryk’s Czechoslovakia in the 1920s he was quite prepared to condemn what Rogers Brubaker has termed “nationalizing nationalism.”[[76]](#footnote-76) Thus, while he felt the Magyars in Slovakia had to come to terms with the new reality and abandon their “nationalistic megalomania”, he admitted their grievances against “a certain Slovak chauvinism” and offered some practical solutions via the existing Minority Treaties.[[77]](#footnote-77)

We have also seen that while Seton-Watson took an essentially primordial view of nations, he always felt that a modern progressive evolution was at work. He was quite prepared to adjust his theories when the evidence suggested otherwise. He argued that some races, such as the ‘Serbo-Croats’, had been slumbering for centuries and were slowly re-awakening.[[78]](#footnote-78) But where this might lead was never predestined. Would he have agreed with his sons, who wrote later in the biography of their father that “national cultures are virtually indestructible”?[[79]](#footnote-79) In fact, in the elder Seton-Watson’s view, the future of nations could never be predicted for it depended on a range of circumstances, including the vitality of a particular people in their state framework, their relative stage of national development, and the practicality of their national aspirations. Here his approach to the Slovenes was instructive. Before the war, he had on practical grounds never envisaged their inclusion in a South Slav national unit as it would cut Austria off from the sea; but after 1914 he began to balance this against an ideal solution – for since the Slovenes were a “kindred race” to Serbs and Croats, they should if possible share the dream of wider national unity.[[80]](#footnote-80)

He brought a similar mixture of pragmatism and idealism even to the fate of his beloved Slovaks, for their natural process of evolution – in a stage behind that of the Czechs - might well change course in the future. After visiting Slovakia in 1923, he even wondered whether the Slovak language would still exist by 1968 on the fiftieth anniversary of the Czechoslovak Republic. Or would a “higher [national] unity” emerge between Czechs and Slovaks, fusing their identities in one nation in the centre of Europe? Once again, the healthy British model came to mind: “For the dual consciousness [….] of the narrower Scottish nationality and of the higher British citizenship embracing and transcending it, is just the conception which is needed in the [Czechoslovak] Republic today.”[[81]](#footnote-81) With this in mind, he continued in the interwar years to be relatively optimistic about Czechoslovakia. It was a different picture in Yugoslavia and Romania, where as a Scot he was anxious about overt centralization and mainly sympathetic to the national grievances of Croatia and Transylvania respectively.[[82]](#footnote-82) In those two states he could identify the mistakes of the Habsburg monarchy (or of pre-war Hungary) being repeated.

As we re-evaluate Seton-Watson, the “historian-fighter” who tried to unravel and understand the complex national threads of East-Central Europe, we cannot ignore the emotional investment which soon inclined him to deep-seated anti-Magyar prejudices. Since the centenary of Trianon is approaching, it is worth emphasizing not just Seton-Watson’s idealistic blind spots but also his pragmatism and sincerity in seeking to reconcile geopolitical tensions. Whether or not we agree with him, he essentially blamed - as a major cause of the war and also the Habsburg empire’s disintegration - the Magyar oligarchy, those men who had promoted a chauvinist agenda in the face of several national awakenings.[[83]](#footnote-83) Their interpretation of the ‘nation’ was, in Seton-Watson’s view, dangerously warped as it had paid no heed to the progressive national forces of the time. He himself had desperately hoped that Austria-Hungary, through essential reforms and restructuring, would survive to fulfil its mission as a crucial point of balance and stability in the European states system. Such a stable unit was the ideal which he would eventually return to in the wake of the interwar nationalist experiments. Thus, during the Second World War, he floated the idea of a Danubian federation as the new framework which might stabilize and strengthen East-Central Europe. Only the place of Hungary in such a constellation gave him pause for thought. For national tensions were still far from resolved, and in 1943, as in 1914, he wrote that Hungary was “perhaps the crux of the whole problem.”[[84]](#footnote-84)

Some nationalist critics have always asserted that Seton-Watson was a meddling outsider who, of course, did not properly understand their particular national mission. In fact he was quite a well-informed observer, a historian who was trying to reconcile the many national causes erupting in the same ‘Habsburg space’, and one bold enough to propose a mix of pragmatic and idealistic solutions. As Gyula Szekfű once noted, the historian on a higher level has his own mission to direct national opinion.[[85]](#footnote-85) Seton-Watson remains controversial because as a westerner he sought to counsel a range of competing national audiences. Believing in national evolution, he was generally flexible in the face of some rigid nationalist responses. It was quite natural that only some of his audiences welcomed his advice or were satisfied with the new national edifices erected on the ruins of Austria-Hungary.

1. On 22 June 2010, a symposium in Bratislava sponsored by the Slovak Foreign Ministry discussed the pro-Slovak activism of both R.W. Seton-Watson and Bjorstjerne Bjornson: ‘Priatelia a obrancovia, Slovensko v aktivitách a diele Roberta Williama Setona Watsona a Bjornstjerna Bjornsona’. 2007 was the centenary of the famous Csernova massacre which Seton-Watson did so much to publicize. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The idea early on that the Croatian sculptor Rudolf Valdec might make a bust of Seton-Watson seems never to have materialized: see Hinko Hinković to Seton-Watson, 13 December 1912 (School of Slavonic and East European Studies, Seton-Watson MSS, SEW/17/9/8). In 1952 a posthumous Serbian tribute by Milan Ćurčin hinted that younger Yugoslav contemporaries now did not recognize Seton-Watson’s major contribution to their nation: see *The Slavonic and East European Review*, vol.30 no 75 (1952): 347. Only in the late 1970s did some prominent Croatian historians collaborate with Seton-Watson’s two sons to produce an edition of his correspondence: *R.W. Seton-Watson and the Yugoslavs. Correspondence 1906-1941,* 2 vols, eds Hugh Seton-Watson et al (London and Zagreb: British Academy, 1976). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. R.W. Seton-Watson, ‘The Zone of Small Nations in Eastern Europe: A Political Survey’ [June 1943], in *R.W. Seton-Watson and his Relations with the Czechs and Slovaks. I: Documents 1906-1951*, eds. Jan Rychlík, Thomas D Marzik and Miroslav Bielik (Martin: Matica Slovenská, 1995), 630. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See László Péter, ‘The Political Conflict between R.W. Seton-Watson and C.A. Macartney over Hungary’, in László Péter and Martyn Rady (eds), *British Hungarian Relations since 1848* (London, 2004), 188 fn 73. And Géza Jeszenszky, ‘The Hungarian Reception of “Scotus Viator”’, *Hungarian Studies*, 5/2 (1989): 147-165. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Admitting he was a foreigner, he wrote in October 1909 that “if one sees less *details* from a distance, one has a better chance of seeing things in their true perspective”: *R.W. Seton-Watson and the Yugoslavs. Correspondence 1906-1941*, I, 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. R.W. Seton-Watson, *The New Slovakia* (Prague: F. Borový, 1924), 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Lev Sychrava’s tribute in *The Slavonic and East European Review*, vol.30 no 75 (1952): 350 (“historian-fighter”); and Harry Hanak, *Great Britain and Austria-Hungary during the First World War: A Study in Public Opinion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. László Péter, ‘R.W. Seton-Watson’s Changing Views on the National Question of the Habsburg Monarchy and the European Balance of Power’, in László Péter, *Hungary’s Long Nineteenth Century. Constitutional and Democratic Traditions in a European Perspective* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 439. [Originally published in *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 82/3 (2004): 655-79. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Scotus Viator, *The Future of Austria-Hungary and the Attitude of the Great Powers* (London: Constable, 1907), 4, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 37 [my emphasis]. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Hugh and Christopher Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe: R.W. Seton-Watson and the Last Years of Austria-Hungary* (London: Methuen, 1981). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. R.W. Seton-Watson, *Treaty Revision and the Hungarian Frontiers* (London, 1934), 69-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. R.W. Seton-Watson, ‘Austria-Hungary and the Southern Slavs’, in R.W. Seton-Watson et al, *The War and Democracy* (London: Macmillan, 1914), 139. Cf. his earlier pre-war view that the Slovenes “have no distinct history of their own”: R. W. Seton-Watson, *The Southern Slav Question* (London: Constable, 1911), 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. R.W. Seton-Watson, ‘The Formation of the Czecho-Slovak State’, in H. Temperley (ed.), *A History of the Peace Conference of Paris*, vol. 4 (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1921), 237. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. R.W. Seton-Watson. *Britain and the Dictators* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), 304. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), and Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Hobsbawm in chapter 4 (‘The Transformation of Nationalism’) sets out the framework within which Seton-Watson formulated his own ideas. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Seton-Watson, ‘Austria-Hungary and the Southern Slavs’, 127, 129. In the wake of the French Revolution, he wrote, there had been a “revival of national feeling in Hungary, Bohemia and Croatia” (127). It is interesting also to observe how vaguely he later interpreted the Czech ‘rebirth’ of the late eighteenth century: “the spirit of nationality was in the air” (R.W. Seton-Watson, *A History of the Czechs and Slovaks*, London: Hutchinson 1943), 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For this impressive conceptualization of nation-building, see Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Seton-Watsons, *The Making of a New Europe*, 15. For example, see also how nationality was extolled by one of his co-authors in the 1914 work *The War and Democracy*: J. Dover Wilson, ‘The National Idea in Europe 1789-1914’, in *The War and Democracy*, 15-74. Italy was praised as “the ‘national idea’ at its best” (56). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., 89-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *R.W. Seton-Watson and the Yugoslavs. Correspondence 1906-1941, I: 1906-1918*, 86:Lupis-Vukić to Seton-Watson, 23 September 1911. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See for example Pieter M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. R.W. Seton-Watson, *Racial Problems in Hungary* (London: Constable, 1908), vii. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. This crisis is ripe for reappraisal by historians and I am preparing a special article on the subject of the Fejérváry government. For the moment the best study in English remains Peter Sugar, ‘An Underrated Event: The Hungarian Constitutional Crisis of 1905-6’, *East European Quarterly*, vol.15 no.3 (Fall, 1981). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See the excellent detailed study by Géza Jeszenszky, *Az elveszett prestízs: Magyarország megítélésének* *megváltozása Nagy-Britanniában (1894-1918)* (Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Peter, ‘R.W. Seton-Watson’s Changing Views’, 452-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Seton-Watsons, *The Making of a New Europe*, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., 33-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., 40, 46-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. See his letter of outrage on 2 November 1907 to *The Spectator*, printed in *R.W. Seton-Watson and his Relations with the Czechs and Slovaks*, I, 126-8. It would be wrong however to suggest, like Gusztav Graz, that “completely under the impression of this bloody case” Seton-Watson began to take an interest in Hungary’s nationalities: Gustáv Gratz, *A Dualizmus kora. Magyarország története 1867-1918*, vol. 2 (Budapest: Magyar szemle társaság, 1934), 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Seton-Watsons, *The Making of a New Europe*, 48-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid., 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Seton-Watson, *Racial Problems in Hungary*, viii. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., 393. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. ‘Hungary and the Parting of the Ways’, *The Spectator*, 20 October 1906, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *Racial Problems in Hungary*, 398. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid., 399. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid., 400. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. See ibid., 399-412. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid., xvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid., 412. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. See R.W. Seton-Watson, *German, Slav, and Magyar: A Study in the Origins of the Great War* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1916), 29-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid., 411-12. By making this distinction between a ‘Hungarian nation’ and a ‘Magyar race’, rather than using one word (*magyar*) for both, Seton-Watson not only acknowledged the presence in Hungary of other rising nationalities but accepted the every-day rhetoric which he encountered about national antagonism. Cf. the questionable idea recently that the two terms of Hungarian and Magyar should indeed be conflated by historians: Judson, *The Habsburg Empire*, ix. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. *Racial Problems in Hungary*, 397. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. *R.W. Seton-Watson and his Relations with the Czechs and Slovaks*, I, 244 (lecture at King’s College, London, 6 July 1915). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Seton-Watson, ‘The Issues of the War’, in *The War and Democracy*, 254. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. The expression he used in: ‘Austria-Hungary and the Southern Slavs’, 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Seton-Watson, *The Southern Slav Question*, 343. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. A recent study of Seton-Watson in Croatian is Zoran Grijak and Stjepan Ćosić, *Figure politike. Lujo Vojnović i Robert William Seton-Watson* (Zagreb: Hrvatski državni arhiv, 2012). It is mainly a synthesis, describing his career and approach to the Yugoslav problem. However, see also the incisive article by Stjepan Matković, ‘Ivo Pilar i R.W. Seton-Watson (Dva pogleda na južnoslavensko pitanje)’, *Croatian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, vol. 1/1 (2006): 21-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. As he later acknowledged: see *German, Slav, and Magyar*, 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Seton-Watson, *Racial Problems in Hungary,* 395. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. For the context of Seton-Watson’s experience, see my recent article: Mark Cornwall, ‘Loyalty and Treason in Late Habsburg Croatia: A Violent Political Discourse before the First World War’, in Jana Osterkamp and Martin Schulze Wessel (eds), *Exploring Loyalty* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2017), 97-121. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Seton-Watson, *The Southern Slav Question,* 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Ibid., ix. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Seton-Watsons, *The Making of a New Europe*, 32. At the time, Seton-Watson himself did not feel Croats were mature enough politically to have a separate national existence: *The Future of Austria-Hungary*, 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe*, 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Ibid., 79. For further Scottish comparisons see Mark Cornwall, ‘Scots and “Skoks”: Exploring the Cultural Interaction of Scotland and Croatia, 1600-1918’, in Mark Cornwall and Murray Frame (eds), *Scotland and the Slavs: Cultures in Contact 1500-2000* (Newtonville MA: Oriental Research Partners, 2001), 95-102. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. The Zagreb university professor Gjuro Šurmin: Matković, ‘Ivo Pilar i Robert W. Seton-Watson’, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Seton-Watson, *The Southern Slav Question*, ix. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Ibid., 65, 68: the only comparable example was perhaps Finland’s relationship within Russia. In 1903 that had been the first nationalist case-study to come to Seton-Watson’s attention on the continent (*The Making of a New Europe*, 16). [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. See Matković, ‘Ivo Pilar i Robert W. Seton-Watson’, 22-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Seton-Watson, *The Southern Slav Question*, 336. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Matković, ‘Ivo Pilar i Robert W. Seton-Watson’, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Seton-Watson, *German, Slav, and Magyar*, 102. Later the events of 1903 would be forgotten in favour of lauding Serbia’s national revival in the nineteenth century: R.W. Seton-Watson, *The Rise of Nationality in the Balkans* (London: Constable, 1917), 38ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Seton-Watson, *The Southern Slav Question*, 53-4, 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Seton-Watson, ‘Austria-Hungary and the Southern Slavs’, 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Seton-Watson, *The Southern Slav Question*, 339; *The Rise of Nationality in the Balkans*, 26: there were, he wrote, Croat and Serb branches of “the race.” [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Seton-Watson, *The Southern Slav Question*, 339-340. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Seton-Watson, *German, Slav, and Magyar*, 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Seton-Watson, *The Southern Slav Question*, 337. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Péter, ‘R.W. Seton-Watson’s Changing Views on the National Question’, 464. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Seton-Watson, ‘The Issues of the War’, 240; *The Rise of Nationality in the Balkans*, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. For his condemnation of “dull uniformity”, see: Seton-Watson, *The Southern Slav Question*, 339; *The New Slovakia*, 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. See Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed. Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge, 1996), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Seton-Watson, *The New Slovakia,* 99ff; and *R.W. Seton-Watson and His Relations with the Czechs and Slovaks*, I, document 139: ‘The Situation in Slovakia and the Magyar Minority’, 412-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Seton-Watson, ‘The Issues of the War’, 259, 265. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Seton-Watsons, *The Making of a New Europe*, 436. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Seton-Watson, ‘The Issues of the War’, 262-64. See also Peter Vodopivec, ‘Seton-Watson and the Slovenes’, in Robert Evans, Dušan Kováč and Edita Ivaničková (eds), *Great Britain and Central Europe 1867-1914* (Bratislava: VEDA, 2002), 77-86. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Seton-Watson, *The New Slovakia*, 129-130. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Seton-Watsons, *The Making of a New Europe*, 420-21. His conception of Yugoslavia was, as in Britain, three nations developing together within one state: *R.W. Seton-Watson and the Yugoslavs*, I, 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. See Seton-Watson, ‘Austria-Hungary and the Southern Slavs’, 135-6, 157: Magyarization “has led directly to the present conflagration”. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. *R.W. Seton-Watson and His Relations with the Czechs and Slovaks*, document 219: ‘The Zone of Small Nations in Eastern Europe’ (June 1943), 628-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Dennis Deletant and Harry Hanak (eds), *Historians as Nation-Builders: Central and South-East Europe* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)