

R. W. Seton-Watson and Nation-Building Clashes in Late Habsburg Space

MARK CORNWALL

IN the intensive nation-building that occurred across eastern Europe in the first half of the twentieth century, the Scottish historian Robert William Seton-Watson stands 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 In contrast, in most other parts of the ex-Habsburg empire, 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 In Hungary

Mark Cornwall is Professor of Modern European History at the University of Southampton.

I would like to thank Martyn Rady and the anonymous reviewers of this article for their constructive advice for making improvements.

¹ The year 2007 was the centenary of the famous Černová massacre which Seton-Watson did so much to publicize. 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 Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson: ‘Priatel’ia a obrancovia, Slovensko v aktivitách a diele Roberta Williama Setona Watsona a Bjørnstjerna Bjørnsona’. At that time during a visit to the foreign ministry in Bratislava, I was shown the Slovak translation (1994) of Seton-Watson’s book *Racial Problems in Hungary* by an official who remarked that it was still highly useful for guiding Slovak-Hungarian relations.

² The early initiative whereby 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 (UCL SSEES Library, Seton-Watson [Robert William] Collection, SEW/17/9/8). In 1952 a posthumous Serbian tribute by Milan Ćurčin hinted that younger

of course he was always publicly disparaged, as a prime enemy of the Magyar nation and someone who supposedly viewed everything through Slovak or Croat spectacles.³ The contemporary Hungarian press often noted his hypocrisy in singling out ‘injustice’ in Hungary while neglecting the national oppression across the British empire.⁴ Indeed, allegedly, Seton-Watson had consciously worked against the interests and integrity of Hungary, branding it as late as the 1940s ‘a last survival of feudalism in central Europe’.⁵ Only to a few Hungarian historians past and present — for example, Domokos Kosáry, László Péter or Géza Jeszenszky — has he remained a respected and often misunderstood figure.⁶

The pseudonyms which Seton-Watson adopted in his early writings after 1900 show 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 from 1916 of his own 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 old empires. As he travelled and wrote, especially before the war, 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.⁷ In this vein he did

Yugoslav contemporaries now did not recognize Seton-Watson’s major contribution to their nation (*The Slavonic and East European Review*, 30, 75, 1952, p. 347). Only in the late 1970s would some prominent Croatian historians collaborate with Seton-Watson’s two sons to produce an edition of his correspondence: Hugh Seton-Watson et al (eds), *R. W. Seton-Watson and the Yugoslavs: Correspondence 1906–1941*, 2 vols, London and Zagreb, 1976.

³ Gusztáv Gratz, *A dualizmus kora. Magyarország története 1867–1918*, 2 vols, Budapest, 1934, 2, p. 152. For the continued vilification of Seton-Watson in modern Hungary, see Géza Jeszenszky, *Lost Prestige: Hungary’s Changing Image in Britain 1894–1918*, translated by Brian McLean, Reno, NV, 2020, pp. 378–80, 385ff.

⁴ See for example, *Pester Lloyd*, 17 February 1915, p. 3.

⁵ 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, 1995, p. 630.

⁶ 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, p. 188, n. 73, and Géza Jeszenszky, ‘The Hungarian Reception of “Scotus Viator”’, *Hungarian Studies*, 5, 2, 1989, pp. 147–65. Even the conservative historian Gyula Szekfű had some respect for Seton-Watson’s erudition (Jeszenszky, *Lost Prestige*, p. 382).

⁷ As he noted in October 1909, ‘if one sees less details from a distance, one has a better chance of seeing things in their true perspective’. Seton-Watson et al (eds), *Seton-Watson*

question, in an undogmatic fashion, how far institutions or solutions could simply be transplanted from western Europe to other states or cultures.⁸ Yet his was still a very British perspective, grounded in a firm conception of Great Britain's relative stability, and the idea that his own country had a paternalistic and civilizing role to play in the world. Specifically, he had a nineteenth-century Western Liberal outlook, that the nation-state was the most progressive organizational unit. On a steep learning curve, he then studied how modern nations in Europe were developing, and pondered the best course to ensure continued peace and stability on the continent. By 1923 he would write that the 'Western doctrine of individual rights [was] the true point of departure' for ensuring stable nations.⁹

Seton-Watson has often been portrayed as a 'historian-fighter', the feisty amateur academic who launched a 'crusade for the oppressed of Austria-Hungary'.¹⁰ Yet 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'.¹¹ He felt that Europe for its overall stability and security needed a strong state or group of 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: it was 'the pivot of European politics [...] its disruption would deal a fatal blow to the balance of power' on the continent.¹² He also, while believing the Habsburg monarchy to be a 'diplomatic necessity', noted how it had evolved historically to match European requirements (forming in the past a barrier against Islam). It was in short 'a *naturally developed unit* which has long since justified its existence'.¹³ For this reason, however, it was vital that the empire continue to reform and evolve so that it might go

and the Yugoslavs, 1, p. 54. However, he admitted to the poet Octavian Goga a year later that it was always impudent ('eine Frechheit') when a foreigner wanted to offer advice. See Cornelia Boda and Hugh Seton-Watson (eds), *R. W. Seton-Watson and the Romanians, 1906–1920*, 2 vols, Bucharest, 1988, 1, p. 305.

⁸ R. W. Seton-Watson, *The New Slovakia*, Prague, 1924, p. 120.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹⁰ See Lev Sychrava's tribute in *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 30, 75, 1952, p. 350 ('historian-fighter'), and Harry Hanak, *Great Britain and Austria-Hungary during the First World War: A Study in Public Opinion*, Oxford, 1962, p. 22.

¹¹ 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, MA, 2012, p. 439 (originally published in *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 82, 3, 2004, pp. 655–79).

¹² Scotus Viator, *The Future of Austria-Hungary and the Attitude of the Great Powers*, London, 1907, 4, p. 60.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 37 (my emphasis).

on playing its vital role on the continent. When by 1914 this seemed to be impossible, Seton-Watson judged that the monarchy would have to suffer national amputations in order to create some new 'national states'.¹⁴ For a host of other viable nations were already emerging and justifying their existence in the same space inhabited by Austria-Hungary. Slowly during wartime, Seton-Watson's growing commitment to these new nations led him to the realization that the Habsburg empire would have to disappear from the map.

Much has been written about Seton-Watson, not least the detailed chronological work by his sons about how he engaged with the Habsburg monarchy in his early career.¹⁵ Yet neither this, nor most other studies, have subjected his views to a critical analysis. Especially there has been little focus on how he conceived the process of 'nation-building', or how and why his ideas may have evolved during the final years of Austria-Hungary. In the following discussion my examples are taken mainly from pre-1914 Hungary and the South Slav region — Seton-Watson's key points of reference — in order to address three interlinked questions which deserve more focused study.

First, how did Seton-Watson interpret 'nation-building' in the late Habsburg monarchy? What criteria did he use to define these nations, and how far was he informed by his own British 'national model'? Second, what solutions did he then suggest for what he often termed the 'races' competing in the same space, and how radical were his proposals? On that basis, should we see him as a pragmatist, always wedded to what was geo-politically possible, or an idealist on a par with the nationalists he encountered? Or was he 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? We know he regularly privileged the requirements of European peace and stability. But how logically did he interpret the national evolutions taking place before the fall of the Habsburgs? He himself suggested that there was indeed a logical development to his thinking.¹⁶ This article may not provide definitive answers to these questions, but it seeks to open up a supposedly well-worn topic for further dissection.

¹⁴ Hugh and Christopher Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe: R. W. Seton-Watson and the Last Years of Austria-Hungary*, London, 1981, p. 102.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See the preface to R. W. Seton-Watson, *Europe in the Melting Pot*, London, 1919, pp. v–xii, where he summarized his writings about Austria-Hungary.

The Revival of Nation-Building

In terms of explaining nation-building or defining what a nation was, Seton-Watson never clearly enunciated his own criteria. Rather these were usually 'unspoken assumptions' to be found within the main arguments of his writing, and they represented an 'ethnic-civic' amalgam of what a modern nation should be, in line with the view of most of his contemporaries.¹⁷ From the start, his own Scottish background firmly informed his outlook. On the one hand, he was immensely proud of his Scottish cultural heritage, and as a precocious teenager published a slender volume of poetry entitled *Scotland for Ever!* On the other, this part of his identity soon became blended with a British (civic) imperial and civilizing perspective through his education in southern England at Winchester College and then Oxford University. We can sense not only Scottish pride, but also an envy or even admiration for his English fellow countrymen, in his much later comment: 'we Celts are intolerant, extravagant and sometimes even vindictive, by comparison with the more placid (often scornfully and infuriatingly placid) Englishman.'¹⁸ The hybrid ethnic identity of his own country helped him understand the complexity of identities which could inhabit one nation or state framework. Even so, he still believed in certain national stereotypes. It was a small step from acknowledging these to interpreting all nations or nationalities as having some special cultural or 'ethnic' base.

In the terminology which he employed to denote the various peoples living within the Habsburg monarchy, Seton-Watson often used the terms 'nationality', 'race' and 'nation' indiscriminately, in a manner wholly typical of the late Victorian era. It is therefore impossible to be too specific about the British lineage of his own thinking. However, just as the pedagogue Thomas Arnold defined 'nationality' as a composite in 1841, Seton-Watson too, after visiting Austria-Hungary for the first time in 1906, noted a mixture of criteria to describe its peoples, including their history, religion and language.¹⁹ After further travels in the region he would increasingly privilege language as a crucial element which offered the best

¹⁷ For a thorough critique of the long-held theory that modern nations belong to either civic or ethnic types, see Timothy Baycroft and Mark Hewitson (eds), *What is a Nation: Europe 1789–1914*, Oxford, 2006, especially Hewitson's very full concluding chapter.

¹⁸ Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe*, pp. 8–9.

¹⁹ Seton-Watson, *The Future of Austria-Hungary*, pp. 6–7 (historic Bohemia, Serbia, Poland), p. 19 (the Ruthenes' 'struggle for their language and racial existence'), p. 22 (religion as 'a growing test of nationality' between Serbs and Croats). See Douglas A. Lorimer, 'Race, Science and Culture: Historical Continuities and Discontinuities 1850–1914', in Shearer West (ed.), *The Victorians and Race*, Aldershot, 1996, p. 14.

chances for successful nation-building. Later, by the 1930s, he would return to defining 'nationality' very broadly: as 'something compounded of race, language, tradition and innermost feeling'. The implication always was that each nationality possessed key ingredients, yet at the same time the phenomenon was metaphysical and intangible, 'something physiological and sacred'.²⁰

If for Seton-Watson the modern concept of 'nationality' was a composite of characteristics, 'race' was for him the atavistic core to be found in all nationalities or nations. He regularly used 'race' in his writings as a term to categorize the peoples across continental Europe, and in this way differentiated them from the peoples within his own country who were 'nations'.²¹ This was the received discourse employed by many around him, and it is tempting to suggest the influence particularly of the historian and Liberal politician James Bryce (whom he would meet during the war). In a series of writings and lectures at the turn of the century, Bryce asserted the 'dissimilarity of character' between races due to their psychological make-up, as well as differing levels of racial advancement or backwardness which created a natural inequality; it produced, in his view, 'inevitable' racial antagonism. He also saw the peoples of Great Britain as 'nationalities' which had progressed beyond the stage of being 'races'.²² Bryce himself had visited Hungary in the 1870s and observed then the 'less advanced [Slovak] race' living next to the Magyars.²³ Thirty years later, Seton-Watson would very publicly apply such racial terminology to the peoples of Eastern Europe, albeit without Bryce's psychological defence of racial inequality. Certainly, he could be imprecise in his terminology; there was a typical tendency to employ the words 'race' and 'nation' interchangeably.²⁴ Usually however, he implied that 'races' were human species that were age-old but steadily evolving, 'in varying stages of civilization'.²⁵ Through their

²⁰ R. W. Seton-Watson, *Treaty Revision and the Hungarian Frontiers*, London, 1934, pp. 69–70.

²¹ I have so far found no examples of Seton-Watson referring to four races in the United Kingdom, only to 'four sister nations': R. W. Seton-Watson, *The Southern Slav Question*, London, 1911, p. ix.

²² Lorimer, 'Race, Science and Culture', pp. 30–31. For Bryce's defence of racial inequality on psychological grounds, see also Douglas A. Lorimer, *Science, Race Relations and Resistance: Britain, 1870–1914*, Manchester, 2013, pp. 215–19, and Paul Rich, *Race and Empire in British Politics*, Cambridge, 1986, pp. 20–21. I am grateful to Peter Mandler for his advice on this subject of race.

²³ Viscount Bryce, *Memories of Travel*, London, 1923, p. 102ff.

²⁴ Rich, *Race and Empire*, p. 3; Baycroft and Hewitson, *What is a Nation?*, p. 317; Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge, 1990, p. 108.

²⁵ Seton-Watson, *Europe in the Melting Plot*, p. 23 (article in *The Round Table*,

conscious combination of diverse traits, older and newer, they emerged as modern 'nationalities'. And these races or nationalities might then eventually evolve into modern 'nations', self-governing state entities which could be composed of an 'endless diversity of race and type'.²⁶ As James Bryce had observed, himself speaking in the tradition of Lord Acton from the 1860s, it was a diversity to be witnessed and welcomed in 'mature' nations like Great Britain.²⁷

From his own travels and observations in Habsburg space, Seton-Watson would also mirror Bryce's firm belief in racial struggles as a natural historical phenomenon. He recorded the many racial struggles from the past in central Europe — for example the 'perennial racial struggle' between Czechs and Germans, or the 'fierce racial war' in Hungary in 1848.²⁸ He then interpreted these struggles as being resurgent, albeit in a new form in the present: witness the 'vulgar brawling of rival races' in the Austrian parliament, or the ethnic tensions which he publicized in his major work, *Racial Problems in Hungary*.²⁹ The trigger for such unrest came because, alongside what he deemed the three 'dominant races' of the Habsburg monarchy (Germans, Magyars and Jews), there was a host of what he would increasingly term 'subject races'.³⁰ Each of these races had an individuality, an identity of their own. Thus the Slovaks were 'one of the most gifted races in Europe' as well as one of the most 'hyper-sensitive' of the Slav races; the Dalmatian Croats were 'the most virile and stubborn element in the [Croat] race'.³¹ Some of the races however were so closely related in origin that he was inclined to designate them as just

December 1914).

²⁶ Seton-Watson, *The Southern Slav Question*, p. 340.

²⁷ Rich, *Race and Empire*, p. 21: Bryce's ideas had particularly been honed through extensive travels in America and South Africa. For the idea of the pluralist vitality of nations, see also Glenda Sluga, 'Bodies, Souls and Sovereignty: The Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Legitimacy of Nations', *Ethnicities* 1, 2, August 2001, pp. 208–09.

²⁸ R. W. Seton-Watson, 'The Future of Bohemia' [July 1915], in Rychlík, Marzik and Bielik (eds), *Seton-Watson and His Relations with the Czechs and Slovaks*, p. 246; Seton-Watson, *Europe in the Melting Pot*, p. 27.

²⁹ R. W. Seton-Watson, *Racial Problems in Hungary*, London, 1908, and letter to *The Spectator*, 8 June 1907. In 1890, the modern squabbling between Czechs and Germans had already been described by *The Spectator* as examples of 'race hatred': Lorimer, 'Race, Science and Culture', pp. 18–19.

³⁰ R. W. Seton-Watson, 'The Issues of the War', in R. W. Seton-Watson, J. Dover Wilson, Alfred E. Zimmern and Arthur Greenwood, *The War and Democracy*, London, 1914, p. 254. In this work, he regularly began to use the term 'subject races', but he had used it much earlier. See *The Spectator*, 15 June 1907.

³¹ Rychlík, Marzik and Bielik (eds), *Seton-Watson and His Relations with the Czechs and Slovaks*, p. 282, quoting article in *The New Europe* (March 1919); Seton-Watson, *The New Slovakia*, p. 8; Seton-Watson, 'The Issues of the War', p. 262.

one race. As we will see, this was notably so with the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. If on his first encounter he tended to portray them as separate races, he soon shifted towards describing them as 'kinsmen' or branches of the same race; in his writings by 1914, a 'Croato-Serb race' had morphed into a 'Southern Slav race' of 'eleven millions'.³² Yet despite a Croat-Serb racial affinity, which for Seton-Watson best expressed itself linguistically, he still interpreted racial divisions as fundamental and not susceptible to any easy process of assimilation in the hands of nationalist agitators. This essentialist approach would stay with him. In the late 1930s he was still writing about an 'intermingling of races' in ex-Habsburg space which made it impossible to draw clear-cut ethnographic frontiers.³³ In other words, something essentialist or even biological obstructed full 'racial' or 'national' assimilation; or as a fellow historian once noted, Seton-Watson 'did not understand assimilation'.³⁴

As this suggests, like many of his contemporaries or the historical figures he admired such as the Czech patriot František Palacký, Seton-Watson was a 'primordialist' who did not think of nations as imaginary or constructed communities.³⁵ Extending from his Scottish roots to what he came to observe across Europe in the early twentieth century, he believed that nations were organic — in a state of constant flux, but usually bearing ancient racial origins. The Slovenes for example were 'a small and ancient race, of vigorous stock and clerical leanings'.³⁶ 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'.³⁷

To be precise, this did mean that Seton-Watson perceived the upsurge of nationalism — the forceful promotion of a national cause — as a modern phenomenon. By the 1930s he would affirm that the 'nationality idea' was 'something quite modern'.³⁸ If we wish to critique his views through the

³² See Seton-Watson, *The Southern Slav Question*, p. 336; Seton-Watson, 'Austria-Hungary and the Southern Slavs', in *The War and Democracy*, p. 160 ('the Southern Slav race'); Seton-Watson, *Europe in the Melting Pot*, pp. 12–13.

³³ R. W. Seton-Watson, *Britain and the Dictators*, Cambridge, 1938, p. 314.

³⁴ Jeszenszky, *Lost Prestige*, p. 390: the view of C. A. Macartney in 1969.

³⁵ See Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Oxford, 1986, p. 12.

³⁶ This in 1914: Seton-Watson, 'Austria-Hungary and the Southern Slavs', p. 139. Cf. his view a few years earlier that the Slovenes 'have no distinct history of their own': *The Southern Slav Question*, p. 2.

³⁷ R. W. Seton-Watson, 'The Formation of the Czecho-Slovak State', in H. W. V. Temperley (ed.), *A History of the Peace Conference of Paris*, vol. 4, London, 1921, p. 237.

³⁸ Seton-Watson, *Britain and the Dictators*, p. 304. Cf. Seton-Watson, *Europe in the Melting Pot*: 'the growth of nationality in the modern sense' (an article published in

eyes of some of our own contemporary theorists of nationalism or national identity, parts of his interpretation mesh quite well with those who have bluntly asserted the modernity of nationalism. Like Benedict Anderson or Eric Hobsbawm, Seton-Watson identified the late eighteenth century as the progressive turning point.³⁹ Like Ernest Gellner, he saw in the Habsburg monarchy the inequalities in power and education which existed alongside a diversity of cultures; it was that disjuncture, that inequality (notably in Hungary) in a modernizing society, which was responsible for stirring nationalist unrest around 1900 and preventing peaceful social integration.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, overall, Seton-Watson's interpretation comes closest to that of Anthony Smith, who convincingly argued that all modern nations have a durable pre-modern ethnic base (what he terms an *ethnie*) upon which they have been constructed.⁴¹ Smith's *ethnie* were Seton-Watson's 'nations' or 'races'. But where Seton-Watson differed from Smith was in his openly primordialist approach, uncritically akin to that of the many middle-class nationalist activists whom he interviewed on his travels. He subscribed fully to the idea that a 'national awakening' was taking place, noting how it was after the French Revolution that the nationality idea had 'obtained a fresh impetus'; the following half-century saw nationality 'simmering everywhere [...] a period of preparation for the rise of national States'.⁴² This then was not simply an acceptance by Seton-Watson that there had once existed *ethnie* or some pre-modern cultural raw material which formed the basis for modern nationalities or nations.⁴³ Rather, the small and larger nations that began to compete in the nineteenth century were simply emerging out of a long hibernation. There was a 'vast mosaic of races' across Habsburg space, all in different stages of development, and

December 1914).

³⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, 1991, and Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*.

⁴⁰ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford, 1983, pp. 88–94, 97.

⁴¹ Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, 13ff, 137ff (for the East European nations being formed out of pre-existing *ethnie*). See also for a similar approach, Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism*, Cambridge, 1997, and emphasizing even more the deep roots of the ethnonational phenomenon, Azar Gat, *Nations: The Long History and Deep Roots of Political Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Cambridge, 2012. Gat argues that nations are not just modern constructs.

⁴² Seton-Watson, 'Austria-Hungary and the Southern Slavs', pp. 127, 129. In the wake of the French Revolution, he wrote, there had been a 'revival of national feeling in Hungary, Bohemia and Croatia' (p. 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, 1943, p. 161.

⁴³ Besides the *ethnie* of Smith, see also Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, p. 49, who admits that nationalism uses the 'raw material' from a pre-nationalist world.

some of these organic phenomena had to be addressed immediately since they were challenging and destabilizing the existing political order.⁴⁴

Undoubtedly, Seton-Watson's training as a historian at New College, Oxford, helped crystallize his view on nations as primordial organisms. Through an early interest in the 'national psychologies' of Germany and Italy (including student visits and vacations there), he was keenly alert to recent nationalist shifts across Europe, always coupling nationality in his mind with notions of progress and liberal democracy.⁴⁵ But in late 1905 he also approached the Habsburg realm on the basis of how he understood the contemporary British state and its constituent parts. The British model of statehood was for him indicative of the diversity which, with care, might be nurtured within one nation or state. His early writing was peppered with Scottish and Irish comparisons: admiring the degree of Scottish stability while warning about 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.⁴⁶

In contrast, he was naturally conscious before 1914 that Britain had a grievance in its own backyard in the shape of Irish nationalism. His preferred 'best solution' was Irish home rule. It pushed him to compare and contrast Ireland with the position of Croatia's home rule under Hungary; and that comparison would be reciprocated by those liberal Croats with whom he soon began to correspond. As one Dalmatian told him in 1911, 'the history of Ireland resembles so much [the] history of Croatia. We only lack such [a] man as Parnell to lead us'.⁴⁷ Seton-Watson, however, was not insensitive to the 'ranting' of Sir Edward Carson and his Ulstermen, feeling that concessions would be required to their Unionist cause if Irish home rule went through. Indeed, during the Great War, he would inadvertently privilege Unionism — or at least took his eye off the simmering Irish nationalist cause — since Carson himself showed surprising support for the predicaments of small nations like Serbia and Romania.⁴⁸ Meanwhile,

⁴⁴ 'Vast mosaic of races.' Seton-Watson, *Europe in the Melting Pot*, p. 23.

⁴⁵ Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe*, p. 15. The concept of 'nationality' was extolled by one of his co-authors in 1914. See J. Dover Wilson, 'The National Idea in Europe 1789–1914', in Seton-Watson, *The War and Democracy*, pp. 15–74: 'Without the realisation of the national idea it is hardly possible to conceive of democratic government for any country' (p. 37); Italy was 'the "national idea" at its best' (p. 56).

⁴⁶ See, for example, Seton-Watson et al. (eds), *Seton-Watson and the Yugoslavs*, 1, p. 240: Seton-Watson to Prince Regent Alexander, 17 September 1915.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 86: Ivo Lupis-Vukić to Seton-Watson, 23 September 1911. See also, Seton-Watson, *The Southern Slav Question*, p. ix.

⁴⁸ R. W. Seton-Watson, *Absolutism in Croatia*, London, 1912, p. 69; Seton-Watson, *The*

what Seton-Watson in 1911 had termed Ireland's 'old lines of cleavage' — Nationalist and Unionist — had (as he predicted) proved to very durable and eventually destructive.⁴⁹ The resulting post-war Irish secession, even if it matched the nationalist separatism which he had helped further in eastern Europe, was something he certainly regretted, as the failure of a British state which had long benefited from its national diversity.

The Hungarian Experience

It was in November 1905, bearing the mental map of Britain's historic constitutional structure, that Seton-Watson first visited Austria-Hungary. The timing was crucial. Some historians have repeatedly asserted a large degree of 'national indifference' across the late Habsburg empire, arguing that many citizens at the grassroots did not view life through a nationalist prism.⁵⁰ This is surely true. Yet the monarchy in these final decades was still a state where a public nationalist discourse was ubiquitous, penetrating the education system and the press as much as the political sphere. As such, while few educated contemporaries could avoid it in their everyday lives, it was also a phenomenon which immediately struck the academic tourist. Seton-Watson himself wrote that on arrival 'the vital question of Nationality met me at every turn and clamoured for a solution'.⁵¹ Most notably, Hungary was in the midst of a constitutional crisis with powerful echoes of the nationalist struggle of 1848–49. A coalition of Hungarian political forces was fighting for greater home rule against the Habsburg monarch, Franz Joseph, who had imposed upon Budapest an allegedly unconstitutional government.⁵²

The 26-year-old Seton-Watson's approach to Hungary was in a long British tradition of admiration for the ideals of Lajos Kossuth and Hungary's own rich 'liberal heritage'.⁵³ Thus, just before visiting the

Making of a New Europe, pp. 89–90; 180, 239 (Carson's support).

⁴⁹ Seton-Watson, *Absolutism in Croatia*, p. 69.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Pieter M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History*, Cambridge MA, 2016, and Tara Zahra, 'Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis', *Slavic Review*, 69, 1, 2010, pp. 93–119.

⁵¹ Seton-Watson, *Racial Problems in Hungary*, p. vii.

⁵² On this under-researched crisis, see Péter Hanák (ed.), *Magyarország története 1890 – 1918*, 2 vols, Budapest, 1978, 1, 557–608, and in English, Peter Sugar, 'An Underrated Event: The Hungarian Constitutional Crisis of 1905–6', *East European Quarterly*, 15, 3, Fall, 1981, pp. 281–306. For some new perspectives, see Mark Cornwall, 'Loyal Servant of Absolutism? The Image of Baron Géza Fejérváry during the Hungarian Constitutional Crisis', in Gabriela Dudeková Kováčová and Daniela Kodajová (eds), *In the Supermarket of History: The Pattern of Modern History and Society in the Central European Region*, Bratislava, 2021, pp. 127–49.

⁵³ See Jeszenszky, *Lost Prestige*, chapter 1.

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 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. Yet while the Compromise of 1867 which created the dualist system of Austria-Hungary 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, he felt, a revision was now 'inevitable'; the Habsburgs had to abandon what he termed their 'absolutist regime' and concede greater sovereignty to the Hungarian people.⁵⁴

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 separate 'nation', but in the rest of the state, he said that there was only one Hungarian nation co-existent with the state. When Seton-Watson asked whether Hungary might usefully grant devolution 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.⁵⁵ Having arrived in Hungary with a distinctly pro-Magyar outlook in late April 1906, Seton-Watson found himself in the midst of an election campaign which ended with the victory of the nationalist Coalition. He immediately encountered a range of idealistic theories, on the one hand about promoting a centralized Hungarian state, on the other about restructuring the empire with federal or territorial solutions to accommodate national demands (the writings of Aurel Popovici and Karl Renner). On his travels he also met Hungarian intellectuals who favoured Magyarization but — notably in Transylvania — some Romanian intellectuals who stressed their own historic rights and cultural requirements, condemning how Hungary's Nationalities Law of 1868 had never been properly implemented.⁵⁶

This dramatic first experience was supplemented in May 1907 by a long tour of the Slovak regions when, we might say, Seton-Watson imbibed the grassroots culture of what he termed this 'most neglected

⁵⁴ Péter, 'R. W. Seton-Watson's Changing Views', pp. 452–53. To describe the Habsburg regime as 'absolutist' reveals how Seton-Watson in early 1906 was imbibing the Magyar nationalist propaganda of the time: see Cornwall, 'Loyal Servant of Absolutism?'.

⁵⁵ Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe*, p. 32.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 33–38.

of the Slav races'.⁵⁷ 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 Černová 'massacre' of October 1907.⁵⁸ As a historian he weighed up age-old ethnic characteristics of the Danubian region and set them against more modern national phenomena, noting that 'new *Schichten* [layers] of the population are ripe and emerging'.⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰ By 1907 his perspective had shifted towards favouring those who were challenging the existing system: he now wrote about his 'conversion to the cause of the nationalities', believing that their voice must be accommodated by the elitist Hungarian regime.⁶¹ To paraphrase József Eötvös (whom he explicitly quoted), the non-Magyar races or nationalities were certainly 'awake' with their 'distinct personalities' and their distinct national cultures.⁶²

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. A year later he understood better the ethnic complexity. Writing in *The Spectator* magazine, he explained:

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.⁶³

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 40, 46–47.

⁵⁸ See his letter of outrage on 2 November 1907 to *The Spectator*, printed in Rychlík, Marzik and Bielik (eds), *Seton-Watson and His Relations with the Czechs and Slovaks*, pp. 126–28. It would be wrong however to suggest, like Gusztáv Gratz, that 'completely under the impression of this bloody case' Seton-Watson began to take an interest in Hungary's nationalities. Gratz, *A dualizmus kora*, 2, 152.

⁵⁹ Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe*, pp. 48–49.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 38.

⁶¹ Seton-Watson, *Racial Problems in Hungary*, p. viii.

⁶² Ibid., p. 393.

⁶³ Seton-Watson, 'Hungary and the Parting of the Ways', *The Spectator*, 20 October 1906, p. 7.

By 1907 he was still defining greater Hungary as a nation, but it was 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’ and a ‘crime against civilization’.⁶⁴ The Magyar clique’s obsession with forging a nationally uniform state at all costs meant that, rather than acknowledging the nation’s diversity, aspiring races like the Slovaks or Romanians were being deliberately suppressed in their ‘natural evolution’.⁶⁵ On the lines of the theory later expounded by Gellner to explain nationalism, Seton-Watson in a much vaguer way alluded to the power disparity in Hungary (the power held by a ‘narrow caste’ in central and local government), and this at a time when non-Magyar races were becoming more educated and aware of their distinct culture within the Hungarian civic nation.⁶⁶ The resulting grievances were dangerously destabilizing Hungary, and thereby disturbing the Habsburg monarchy as a healthy factor in Europe.

While still interpreting the ‘Hungarian nation’ as synonymous with the contemporary Hungarian kingdom, Seton-Watson argued that the ethnic diversity must be nurtured and the policy of forced Magyarization abandoned. 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’.⁶⁷ Just as the Irish problem was still far from resolution, so the Hungarian problem would not be solved by brute force, especially since non-Magyar peoples — whether Slovaks or Romanians — possessed a broader cultural hinterland with ‘kinsmen’ across the state frontiers of Hungary.⁶⁸

With his polemical stance, Seton-Watson completely downplayed the possibility of voluntary assimilation into any putative Hungarian state, terming it ‘apostasy’ when non-Magyar ‘renegades’ chose to assimilate and ‘abjure their native language and customs’; this had included not only many Germans and Jews, but also notable Magyar heroes like Lajos

⁶⁴ Seton-Watson, *Racial Problems in Hungary*, p. 399.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 392, 395; Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, pp. 88–94.

⁶⁷ Seton-Watson, *Racial Problems in Hungary*, p. 400.

⁶⁸ Ibid. Here, in arguing about the isolation of the Magyar language, Seton-Watson vastly exaggerated the degree to which Slav languages were mutually intelligible (‘from Pressburg to Vladivostok’).

Kossuth or Sándor Petőfi who in fact had Slovak forefathers.⁶⁹ More recent historians in the wake of Seton-Watson, while acknowledging a policy of Magyarization from the 1870s to forge together a Hungarian political nation by forced assimilation, have balanced this with substantial evidence of voluntary assimilation and ongoing national integration in the years up to 1914. Already in 1937 C.A. Macartney, for example, readily accepted that there had been a systematic Magyarization of Slovak culture, but opined that 'denial of national culture is only oppressive when it is felt to be oppressive... [Magyarization] was in no way resented by the great majority of the Slovaks'.⁷⁰ Many historians have agreed, identifying education and the bureaucracy as typical arena where German and Slovak elites assimilated quite willingly, while Jews, whom Seton-Watson even termed 'parasites' in one unguarded moment, were readily embracing social mobility and becoming Magyars.⁷¹ In one of the best studies to explore this phenomenon in depth, Joachim von Puttkamer has shown how in the field of education the 'Hungarian state idea' by 1914 was successfully gaining ground; this occurred through a mixture of voluntary and pressurized assimilation, with different intensity in different regions. Notably, it was successfully winning out in Upper Hungary (among Slovak speakers) as Slovak pupils saw the opportunities offered by becoming Magyar. In contrast, there was much more resistance — or cultural strength — in Transylvania among the Romanian and Saxon communities. Drawing succour notably from their own confessional schools, Romanian and Saxon national mobilization was growing in tandem or in competition with the advance of the Hungarian state idea, solidifying national minorities within a Hungarian political nation.⁷²

⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 49, 398, 400. See also, Jeszenszky, *Lost Prestige*, pp. 280, 285.

⁷⁰ C. A. Macartney, *Hungary and her Successors: The Treaty of Trianon and its Consequences, 1919–1937*, London, 1937, p. 91. For the Hungarian regime's modernizing interpretation of Magyarization, see Ludwig Gogolák, 'Ungarns Nationalitätengesetze und das Problem des Magyarischen National- und Zentralstaates', in Adam Wandruszka and Peter Urbanitsch (eds), *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918, Band III: Die Völker des Reiches*, 2 vols, Vienna, 2003, 2, pp. 1288–303.

⁷¹ Andrew C. Janos, *The Politics of Backwardness in Hungary, 1825–1945*, Princeton, NJ, 1982, pp. 111–18, 125–27 (118: in 1910, 78 per cent of Jews gave Magyar as their mother tongue). For 'Jewish parasites', see Seton-Watson, *Europe in the Melting Pot*, 2 (article in *The Round Table*, September 1914). Seton-Watson certainly displayed latent antisemitism, noting once that 'Dr [Karl] Lueger's offensive gibes at the "Judaeo-Magyars" contain a painful element of truth'. Seton-Watson, *The Southern Slav Question*, p. 340.

⁷² Joachim von Puttkamer, *Schulalltag und nationale Integration in Ungarn. Slowaken, Rumänen und Siebenburger Sachsen in der Auseinandersetzung mit der ungarischen Staatsidee 1867–1914*, Munich, 2003, pp. 446–52.

Any 'success' in the process of Magyarization was of course anathema to Seton-Watson who believed that the 'natural evolution' of non-Magyar nationalities was unstoppable. The evidence suggested otherwise and, notwithstanding the often offensive and chauvinistic political language of Magyarization, the grassroots reality and even the tactics in state policy were far more nuanced than Seton-Watson would ever admit or understand. A small example was the national perspective of the leading statesman Count István Tisza. Seton-Watson painted him as 'utterly reactionary on the racial question', citing a brilliant speech from July 1910 when in the aftermath of an election victory Tisza had emphasized that the Magyar 'national state [was] not a conglomerate of different races'.⁷³ In fact, ironically, Tisza's perspective was not wholly at odds with Seton-Watson's. Tisza fully conceded the need for 'brotherly relations with the nationalities' (*nemzetiség* in Hungarian),⁷⁴ accepting that their cultural autonomy should be nurtured, and believing like Seton-Watson that forced Magyarization would fail. He too was closely observing — as he noted in his 1910 speech — the reality of strong national consciousness among Romanian speakers in Transylvania. But where he differed sharply from *Scotus Viator* was in his solution: he was determined to steer educated Romanians towards Hungarian state service, and away from national-political agitation or any separate political parties within Hungary.⁷⁵ That danger he interpreted — perhaps correctly — as a threat to the Hungarian state idea. Seton-Watson in contrast interpreted political nationalism in the hands of minority leaders as part of the rich racial diversity of the Hungarian civic nation.

Nevertheless, despite his hyperbole, Seton-Watson's own solution in *Racial Problems* was in fact a compromise and not particularly radical. He did not propose breaking up historic Hungary into separate nations on some ethnic or racial criteria, or the secession of territory to the neighbouring Serbian or Romanian national kingdoms. This was both impracticable and dangerous. He argued that the Serbs of Hungary were largely passive and, on the basis of his travels in Transylvania, felt that no strong Romanian irredentist movement existed there. In short, separatism was only favoured by those who wanted to dissolve the Dual Monarchy

⁷³ R. W. Seton-Watson, *Corruption and Reform in Hungary: A Study of Electoral Practice*, London, 1911, pp. 48, 187–91: Tisza's speech, which Seton-Watson read as 'utterly reactionary' despite its conciliatory tone in the cultural sphere.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

⁷⁵ See Gabor Vermes, *István Tisza: The Liberal Vision and Conservative Statecraft of a Magyar Nationalist*, New York, 1985, pp. 67, 140–42.

and provoke a European conflagration.⁷⁶ Nor did he suggest as practical the transformation of Hungary or the wider empire into a federation of nationalities. He even balked at the idea of 'racial autonomy' (a major devolution of power to the regions within Hungary), not just because Budapest would never agree to that, but because it would weaken the Hungarian national unit.⁷⁷

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 a major Reform Bill for Hungary to combat oligarchical rule and discrimination. It envisaged reform of the narrow franchise, of local government, of education, and freedom of the press. This would reduce the Magyar racial monopoly while also reaffirming the language rights set out in the 1868 Nationalities Law. Through a recognition of regional cultural ('racial') diversity, for example via a reform of county government and the use of regional languages in schools and courts, aspiring nationalities like the Slovaks and Romanians would, just like the Scots in Britain, begin to find their rightful place within the larger Hungarian political nation.⁷⁸ Meanwhile, for practical reasons (as in Britain) a single Magyar state language should remain in the kingdom. None of these suggestions, the author assured his readers, 'impair the sovereignty of the Crown of St Stephen or the territorial unity of Hungary'.⁷⁹

As this shows, Seton-Watson in conceptualizing the Hungarian nation did indeed accept something of 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.⁸⁰ It also followed from the 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 element within Britain).⁸¹ His liberal credentials led him

⁷⁶ Seton-Watson, *Racial Problems in Hungary*, pp. 402–05.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 409. These views matched those he had already encountered during his first visit to Transylvania in 1906, for example from the Romanian politician Vasile Goldiș. See his 'Conversations in Transylvania' (May–June 1906), in Boda and Seton-Watson (eds), *Seton-Watson and the Romanians*, 1, 170.

⁷⁸ Seton-Watson, *Racial Problems in Hungary*, pp. 410–11.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 412.

⁸⁰ See R. W. Seton-Watson, *German, Slav, and Magyar: A Study in the Origins of the Great War*, London, 1916, pp. 29–30; Seton-Watson, *Racial Problems in Hungary*, p. 397.

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 411–12. By making this distinction between a 'Hungarian nation' and a

particularly to condemn the Magyar leaders for conflating their interests with those of the Hungarian nation and trying to impose their supposed historic national right by 'brute force' on other races of the kingdom.⁸²

When in the following years the Hungarian authorities did not alter their national course, Seton-Watson's natural inclination towards a compromise solution shifted. He was shocked by the regime's continued hounding of nationalist activists such as the Romanian poet-journalist Octavian Goga, arrested in 1910 for publishing anti-state material. Seton-Watson exclaimed, 'What would be said of a Government which permitted the arrest of Mr W. B. Yeats for an anti-English article?'⁸³ But his stance was further honed by his own travels. By 1914, after new observations in the south of the monarchy, his ethno-linguistic criteria for assessing viable nations within Habsburg space was taking full precedence over any historic rights. This naturally inclined him further towards those 'young nations' who were challenging the status quo of one historic Hungarian nation. It also 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.⁸⁴ Hungary in contrast was a nation which, through an '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.'⁸⁵

'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 nationalist rhetoric which he encountered. According to Géza Jeszenszky, Seton-Watson was one of the first in the English-speaking world consistently to make this distinction (Jeszenszky, *Lost Prestige*, p. 239 fn 73). This distinction is still valuable for the historian, helping us to interpret the contemporary nationalist discourses in Hungary, but it has been queried by some on the grounds that it makes 'little intellectual sense'. See Judson, *The Habsburg Empire*, p. ix.

⁸² Seton-Watson, *Racial Problems in Hungary*, p. 397.

⁸³ R. W. Seton-Watson, 'Political Persecution in Hungary', *The Spectator*, 22 January 1910; reprinted in Boda and Seton-Watson (eds), *Seton-Watson and the Romanians*, 2, 654. Goga visited him in Scotland in October 1910.

⁸⁴ Rychlík, Marzik and Bielik (eds), *Seton-Watson and His Relations with the Czechs and Slovaks*, p. 244 (lecture at King's College, London, 6 July 1915).

⁸⁵ 'The Issues of the War', p. 254 (p. 251: the Magyar oligarchy had been 'Austria's evil genius'). See also Boda and Seton-Watson (eds), *Seton-Watson and the Romanians*, 1, p. 404: he noted in October 1914 that his 'friend' Austria had committed suicide and 'there is nothing left but to bury him'.

The Southern Slav Question

It was through studying the Southern Slavs in the years before the war that Seton-Watson increasingly privileged language as a key criterion for defining a nation and for stable national unity in East Central Europe. 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 which balanced an aspirational approach against what was practical or feasible. First, he wanted a practical solution which would stabilize the Habsburg monarchy in the south, and ensure European peace at a time of Balkan upheaval. Second, as a Western Liberal he abhorred the state repression he had witnessed in Hungary, and continued to advocate compromise with the emerging democratic forces which were pushing the 'principle of Nationality'.⁸⁶ Third, like so many of the nationalist-activists he encountered, he felt that the progressive phenomenon of modern nation building could not be stopped. In the wake of German and Italian unification in the 1860s, when 'racial units' seemed to have naturally combined together, 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.'⁸⁷ 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. Once again, at least until 1914, he felt that the intense transition towards national/racial unity had to be nurtured; and ideally it should also be channelled into incorporating such national groups within a large and 'racially diverse' state unit (like the Habsburg monarchy).

Seton-Watson's belief in inevitable South Slav unity seems idealistic today and certainly, with the disappearance since the 1980s of 'Yugoslav historiography', it has diluted his appeal in present-day Croatia.⁸⁸ In taking his particular stance on the Southern Slav question, he typically blended his ideals or prejudices with what he discovered during his travels. The latter certainly made him aware of some of the interpretations and

⁸⁶ The expression he used in 'Austria-Hungary and the Southern Slavs', p. 138.

⁸⁷ Seton-Watson, *The Southern Slav Question*, p. 343.

⁸⁸ A recent study of Seton-Watson in Croatian is Zoran Grijak and Stjepan Ćosić, *Figure politike. Lujo Vojnović i Robert William Seton-Watson*, Zagreb, 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*, 1, 1, 2006, pp. 21–45.

solutions that were circulating in the region: whether Pan-Croat, Pan-Serb, Yugoslav (Croato-Serb) or even Great Austrian.⁸⁹ His own intellectual trajectory stemmed partly from the way that he approached the South Slav region after his previous Hungarian experiences. He encountered 'Croatian nation-building' principally via Dalmatia in 1909 where the ideas of the *Risorgimento* were circulating.⁹⁰ His main contacts were Croatian lawyers and politicians like Josip Smodlaka, Frano Supilo, Ivan Lorković and Ante Trumbić. These were liberal intellectuals with a critical eye who, in the spirit of the so-called 'new political course' in the region, strongly favoured Serbo-Croat cooperation and closer unity in order to promote constitutional and social reform. It was a radical programme which explicitly aimed at breaking Austria-Hungary's dualist structure by uniting together the 'Triune kingdom' of Dalmatia and Croatia-Slavonia; at the same time, it challenged the authoritarian methods being employed in contemporary Croatia.⁹¹

As with Hungary in 1906, Seton-Watson entered the Croatian political struggle at a turbulent moment, when the chief progressive force in Croatian politics — the Croat-Serb Coalition (which had been in government in 1906–07) — was under attack from the regime of the new *ban*, Baron Pavao Rauch. The vivid experience of Zagreb in May 1909 would very much shape his tendency to see national stirrings as struggles for liberation against nefarious 'absolutist' interests. Already sure that the Magyars were using brute force against 'hydra-headed' national movements in Hungary, he was now an eye-witness to the wielding of another blunt instrument in Croatia.⁹² The Rauch regime was trying to assert its dominance over the vocal Coalition forces by dividing off and targeting its Serb leadership. In a major trial that lasted seven months, fifty-three Serb intellectuals and politicians were charged with treason due to alleged irredentist agitation in favour of the kingdom of Serbia. While the Serb defendants argued — on lines that Seton-Watson understood — that a Serb national consciousness was awakening, the prosecution countered that those of Orthodox faith were simply being manipulated: there was no 'Serb ethnicity' in the midst of the Croatian nation.⁹³ It is clear that Seton-Watson only briefly attended

⁸⁹ See Mark Cornwall (ed.), *Sarajevo 1914: Sparking the First World War*, London, 2020, pp. 2–8.

⁹⁰ As he later acknowledged. See *German, Slav, and Magyar*, p. 107.

⁹¹ See Nicholas Miller, *Between Nation and State: Serbian Politics in Croatia before the First World War*, Pittsburgh, PA, 1997, chapter 3.

⁹² Seton-Watson, *Racial Problems in Hungary*, p. 395.

⁹³ 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

the trial and could not understand most of the proceedings conducted in Croatian. He could observe the judges' vindictive attitude, and their drunken carousing in the cafes of Zagreb, but otherwise secured his information second-hand about the trial arguments.⁹⁴ Yet on that basis he described the trial as 'one of the grossest travesties of justice in modern times'.⁹⁵ He was convinced that he was again witnessing Magyar misrule, for Hungary's dysfunctional management of Croatia over the past half-century seemed to be at the root of the problem. In the face of ongoing nation-building, he observed, 'how ineffectual are repression and lack of sympathy in the solution of any national or racial question'.⁹⁶

We can recall that Apponyi himself had conceded that Croatia was 'a nation with its own distinctive rights and positions'.⁹⁷ Seton-Watson had realized something of that reality when he briefly visited Zagreb in mid-1908 and talked to some personalities with strong Croatian nationalist views such as Izidor Kršnjavi.⁹⁸ By the time he met Kršnjavi a year later he had gained a better understanding of the linguistic bond between Croats and Serbs (he himself was learning the language), and he suggested that the two 'races' could ideally combine together. In other words, a new nation seemed to be emerging in the south of the monarchy which (as in Britain or Hungary) might incorporate a vibrant 'racial' diversity if provided with the correct state framework. While Kršnjavi demurred that the Croat and Serb cultures were mutually repellent, Seton-Watson thought of similar contrasting cultures which successfully managed to combine within Scotland.⁹⁹ It was a fresh example of how he was interpreting through

(eds), *Exploring Loyalty*, Göttingen, 2017, pp. 97–121, and Iskra Iveljić, *Anatomija jedne velikaške porodice Rauchovi*, Zagreb, 2014, pp. 57–76. See also, for the complexity behind Serb ethnic affiliation in these years, Filip Tomić, 'Serbs in Croatia and Slavonia 1908–14: The Contested Construction, Employment, and Reception of an Ethnic Category', *Austrian History Yearbook*, 49, 2018, pp. 58–72.

⁹⁴ UCL SSEES Library, Seton-Watson (Robert William) Collection, SEW/17/26/6, Seton-Watson to Henry Wickham Steed, 24 May 1909. The limits of how far he followed proceedings are clear from comparing his published account with the actual transcript of the trial.

⁹⁵ Seton-Watson, *The Southern Slav Question*, p. 184.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

⁹⁷ Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe*, p. 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*, p. 58.

⁹⁸ For the national world-view of Kršnjavi, head of the Croatian department of education and religious affairs in the 1890s see, Iso Kršnjavi, *Zapisci iza kulisa hrvatske politike*, ed. Ivan Krtalić, 2 vols, Zagreb, 1986, and Igor Vranic, *Izidor Kršnjavi – A Sketch of an Intellectual at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, unpublished PhD dissertation, European University Institute Florence, 2019.

⁹⁹ Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe*, p. 69.

British and Scottish spectacles; while this inclined him naturally to sympathize with evolving small nations or sub-nations, it offered a flexible and inclusive model for what he was encountering. Thus, on his next long visit to Dalmatia in 1910, he told his Croatian hosts at a farewell dinner how '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.¹⁰⁰ Here he was defining Dalmatia itself as a budding small nation, but equally Dalmatia might become one part of a larger national unit on the British model.

When it came to the issue of Croatian nation-building within Greater Hungary, there could also be natural parallels to Scottish home rule within Great 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 for an Irishman.¹⁰¹ In his introduction to the *Southern Slav Question* (1911), 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.¹⁰²

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-Croatian 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 clear, even if he argued that the character of Croatia's autonomy within Hungary was *sui generis* in Europe.¹⁰³

Seeking a solution to the problem of Croatian nation-building, Seton-Watson did not, however, see historic rights as a firm basis which should

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 79.

¹⁰¹ The Zagreb university professor Gjuro Šurmin. Matković, 'Ivo Pilar i Robert W. Seton-Watson', p. 28.

¹⁰² Seton-Watson, *The Southern Slav Question*, p. ix.

¹⁰³ Ibid., pp. 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).

take precedence any more 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 evolution of nationality among the South Slavs, something that effectively trumped any narrow nationalist agenda based on historic tradition. He rejected, for example, the vision of Josip Frank's Party of Pure Right because its obsession with Croatian 'state right', and its equating of the Croat race with the Croatian nation, mirrored the Magyar oligarchy's racist agenda for Hungary.¹⁰⁴ Instead, he lauded the phenomenon of modern progressive nationalism. When he told one Dalmatian correspondent in 1909 that 'the force of circumstance and historic evolution are on your side', he meant 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 and were natural 'kinsmen'.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, with typical exaggeration, he went so far as to characterize the problem for the southern Slav region as follows: '[This] 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.'¹⁰⁶

It is perhaps surprising, given Seton-Watson's historical research, that he minimized the historic or indeed religious divisions in the region and prioritized the signs of Southern Slav unity. Other contemporary commentators characterized such ties as themselves 'artificial'.¹⁰⁷ Yet in fact, Seton-Watson's enthusiasm for 'inevitable' South Slav unity was still tempered by pragmatism; a state framework was needed for this modern nation (namely the Habsburg empire), and state borders could not simply be redrawn to incorporate those Serbs residing outside the monarchy in Serbia and Montenegro. Indeed, on first assessing the situation, he was against including Serbia in any new national unit. Serbia's recent history (notably the brutal murder of King Aleksandar Obrenović in 1903) suggested to him a primitive barbarity, or at least — echoing Kršnjavi's controversial language — it confirmed Serbia as having a decidedly 'eastern' rather than 'western' culture which would obstruct any easy integration into 'the nation'.¹⁰⁸ This hints at Seton-Watson's belief that nations or races were evolving at different speeds, with some elements still

¹⁰⁴ Seton-Watson, *The Southern Slav Question*, p. 339.

¹⁰⁵ See Matković, 'Ivo Pilar i Robert W. Seton-Watson', pp. 22–23.

¹⁰⁶ Seton-Watson, *The Southern Slav Question*, p. 336 (my italics).

¹⁰⁷ Matković, 'Ivo Pilar i Robert W. Seton-Watson', p. 38.

¹⁰⁸ Seton-Watson, *The Southern Slav Question*, p. 337.

less civilized thanks to an 'unkindly fate' (for Serbia, its long subjection to the Ottoman empire). He would later date the 'rapid renaissance of [Serbia's] national spirit' from the time of the Bosnian crisis in 1909. But his own views only began to alter after Serbia's victory in the Balkan Wars, the evident pro-Serbian enthusiasm across Croatian territory, and a personal visit to Belgrade in April 1913. In his mind the once barbaric kingdom, which had long struggled valiantly for liberation from the Turks, was now transforming itself into 'a virile and progressive peasant state'.¹⁰⁹ It might worthily claim some leadership of the new South Slav nation which was emerging.

This shift certainly reinforced Seton-Watson's conviction that there existed one common 'Serbo-Croat race', long cemented together by language, or alternatively 'two kindred races' who were at last fusing together into a single nation.¹¹⁰ Already before the patriotic upsurge of the Balkan Wars, his solution was the creation of a new territorial entity which would both nurture and contain the various branches of the race: as he noted, 'the larger Southern Slav patriotism should include and transcend the sense of racial individuality'.¹¹¹ This could and should occur within the Habsburg monarchy through 'Trialism'. Austrian statesmen, he imagined, would be the most inclined to restructure the empire, to create a third political unit composed of Serbs and Croats across its southern territories. Since the monarchy had shown real vigour in annexing Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908, such a large national unit seemed even more feasible. Seton-Watson was both idealistic and pragmatic in backing Trialism. Not only did he see it facilitating the 'inevitable' march towards South Slav unity, destroying the 'artificial' borders between Croatia, Dalmatia and Bosnia. It also seemed to be supported by some German-Austrian politicians, and even 'favoured in the highest quarters' (a hint that the heir-apparent archduke Franz Ferdinand was sympathetic). Therefore, some Austrian initiative offered the most promising way forward as late as 1913-14.¹¹² In contrast, Seton-Watson expected little from the Magyar

¹⁰⁹ Seton-Watson, *German, Slav, and Magyar*, pp. 81, 102. The bloody events of 1903 would later 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, 1917, p. 38ff.

¹¹⁰ Seton-Watson, 'Austria-Hungary and the Southern Slavs', p. 140; Seton-Watson, *The Southern Slav Question*, p. 339.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 340.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 338, 342-43. For his continued belief in June 1913 in South Slav unity under Austrian leadership, see Joseph M. Baernreither, *Fragmente eines politischen Tagebuches*, Berlin, 1928, p. 253. For new thinking on the varied interpretations of 'trialism', see Andrej Rahten, 'Great Expectations: The Habsburg Heir Apparent and the Southern Slavs', in

regime, and of course cherished Trialism all the more because it would destroy the dualist system where Magyar chauvinism could flourish. Yet — a sign of his own flexibility — he did at one point float the idea that Magyar statesmen might finally compromise with their racial neighbours and create a 'Balkan confederation' under Magyar leadership.¹¹³ With its overarching state structure, this too had echoes of the British model, even if it was wildly utopian.

We can see that Seton-Watson in the years before the war was (typically) advocating both an ethnic and civic base for the new South Slav nation: it would be 'racially' united, yet still expound cultural diversity and an inclusive citizenship within a larger territorial unit. Yet the power-realities meant that such a project needed incisive Austrian support. The Austrians, he noted, just 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'.¹¹⁴ Only by 1914 did he increasingly sense that Vienna would never take this courageous or risky step in the south. Instead, it was Serbia in the wake of the Balkan Wars which seemed to be grasping the nettle, leading the moral mission to solve the 'Southern Slav Question'. He had long predicted that any solution executed by the kingdom of Serbia could only occur through a European war.¹¹⁵ For in terms of nation-building in the region, it implied that older political or national frameworks would have to disappear to make way for new progressive nations more in tune with the age.

According to that logic, when a European war did start in August 1914, Seton-Watson saw South Slav unity under Serbian leadership as inevitable. He embarked on a campaign to amputate both South Slav and Romanian territories from an empire that had proved incapable of resolving its own racial problems. Writing in November, he observed that the war had to be decided 'in accordance with [national] aspirations rather than the territorial ambitions of dynasties and racial cliques'.¹¹⁶ This meant in his eyes the end of Austria-Hungary. A visit to both Serbia and Romania in the winter of 1915 reinforced the justice and feasibility of South Slav and Romanian amputations, for surely Romania would now take the path mapped out by Italy when it united its nation sixty years earlier?¹¹⁷ But

Cornwall (ed.), *Sarajevo 1914*, pp. 39–52.

¹¹³ Seton-Watson, *The Southern Slav Question*, p. 341.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 339–40.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 337.

¹¹⁶ Seton-Watson, 'The Issues of the War', p. 240.

¹¹⁷ See Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe*, pp. 112–15; Boda and Hugh Seton-

it was his fateful meeting in Rotterdam in October 1914 with the Czech politician Tomáš Masaryk that produced the most radical decision; for in fully endorsing Masaryk's vision of an 'independent Bohemia' (in fact a Czecho-Slovak state across central Europe), Seton-Watson realized that this would inevitably wreck the Habsburg monarchy as any kind of national framework. At first it was a maximum goal, dependant on the military defeat of Germany, but his persistent campaigning thereafter in favour of the Czechoslovak cause left him ever more committed to the vision of a New Europe in place of the Pan-German programme which steadily threatened Austria.¹¹⁸ As he noted in a public lecture of July 1915, in place of the 'foul and unnatural system' of Austria-Hungary, 'we hope that Bohemia may rise phoenix-like from the great European conflagration'.¹¹⁹ Like Masaryk and other exiles from the monarchy, Seton-Watson too had finally burnt his intellectual bridges and shifted his horizons towards the shape which the New Europe might take.

Conclusion

As this discussion has shown, R. W. Seton-Watson, in seeking to solve the 'racial' tensions in the Habsburg monarchy, was alert to any illiberal oppression of its peoples. He also had a typical British liberal outlook in weighing up those forces which seemed to threaten European stability.¹²⁰ But a third element in his theorizing was a fundamental belief that nations, often with a common linguistic core, were fast being re-born in the region. At the start he termed this a matter of 'racial problems' or the 'problem of nationality', which the Habsburg monarchy needed to resolve.¹²¹ By the Great War, however, this became transformed in his writings into the 'principle of nationality', something that needed to be imposed on the empire rather than just recognized by it.¹²² As his nuanced argument was increasingly blunted by more categorical wartime statements, he began to

Watson (eds), *Seton-Watson and the Romanians*, 1, p. 415: letter to Octavian Goga, late January 1915.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 110–11. See also, for his conversion, R. W. Seton-Watson, *Masaryk in England*, Cambridge, 1943, pp. 43, 63; one memorandum which he revised for Masaryk in late 1915 stated 'of course Austria-Hungary must be dismembered' (p. 195).

¹¹⁹ Rychlík, Marzik and Bielík (eds), *Seton-Watson and His Relations with the Czechs and Slovaks*, p. 244.

¹²⁰ Péter, 'R. W. Seton-Watson's Changing Views on the National Question', p. 464.

¹²¹ For example, *The Southern Slav Question*, p. 343; *Europe in the Melting Pot*, pp. 22, 38.

¹²² 'Austria-Hungary and the Southern Slavs', pp. 138, 160; 'The Issues of the War', pp. 244, 263, 269; *German Slav and Magyar*, p. 51. He also used the term 'principle of nationality' in December 1912 in an article for the *Contemporary Review*.

describe the process of nation-building more forcefully: the phenomenon of nationality was 'one of the foundation stones of the new era [...] capable of truly volcanic outbursts'.¹²³ 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.

According to László Péter, Seton-Watson's commitment to the principle of nationality was always subordinate to his concern for political stability and the balance of power in Europe. At face value his writings may suggest this, for in the many 'national' solutions he advocated, either the existing territorial structures were to remain in place, or borders were to be carefully adjusted to maintain regional stability.¹²⁴ Yet, as we have seen, while Seton-Watson believed that modern nationalism was unstoppable, his actual commitment to the nationality principle was never absolute. He did not simply propose that state borders should be re-drawn on the basis of ethnicity or 'racial purity'. Rather, in hoping that burgeoning nations would be nurtured, he saw their best state framework for modern development as the one in which he himself lived: the British Isles, where a number of sub-nations lived relatively harmoniously side by side. When harping on that model, he was not oblivious to British misrule in Ireland (where some Magyars accused him of hypocrisy), but he did during wartime exaggerate the degree of 'racial freedom' which prevailed across the wider British empire.¹²⁵ Nevertheless, his solutions for Habsburg space, before and after the Great War, were largely consistent. States or existing national units within states should, on the homegrown British model, try to avoid any 'dull uniformity' and should delight in their racial diversity.¹²⁶

Before the war, this meant that in the case of Hungary or the emerging South Slav nation, the practical centralist needs 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,

¹²³ 'The Issues of the War', p. 240; *The Rise of Nationality in the Balkans*, p. 23.

¹²⁴ Péter, 'R. W. Seton-Watson's Changing Views on the National Question', p. 463. As one example, see his comments on the border settlement after the Balkan Wars: Boda and Hugh Seton-Watson (eds), *Seton-Watson and the Romanians*, 1, pp. 386–87. While stressing the regional balance of power, he also supported ethnic re-alignments and the force of the resurgent Serbian and Romanian nations: in other words, it was necessary to channel and control the outburst of nation-building.

¹²⁵ See 'The Passing of the Status Quo', *The New Europe*, 5, 64, 3 January 1918 (also reproduced in *Europe in the Melting Pot*, p. 155): 'Our belief in racial freedom, whether in a liberal confederation of self-governing peoples or in the absolute independence of each, is no fetish.'

¹²⁶ For his condemnation of 'dull uniformity', see *The Southern Slav Question*, p. 339; *The New Slovakia*, p. 119.

or perhaps Dalmatian within a South Slav unit). After the war, when his sympathies sided unequivocally with the founding statesmen of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia who needed to stabilize their countries, his approach remained virtually the same. Even in Tomáš Masaryk's Czechoslovakia in the 1920s he was quite prepared to condemn what Rogers Brubaker has termed 'nationalizing nationalism'.¹²⁷ Thus, while he felt that the Magyars in Slovakia should come to terms with the new reality and abandon their 'nationalistic megalomania', he admitted their grievances against a certain Slovak chauvinism.¹²⁸ He hoped that the new Minority Treaties guaranteed under the auspices of the League of Nations would serve to ameliorate such tensions, facilitating the 'fullest possible respect for rights of nationality compatible with the existence and safety of the State'. Czechoslovakia, hopefully, might be a model in that regard.¹²⁹

We have also seen that while Seton-Watson took an essentially primordial or organic view of nations, he always sensed 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 as nations.¹³⁰ 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'?¹³¹ 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 feasibility 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

¹²⁷ See Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed. Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, Cambridge, 1996, p. 5.

¹²⁸ Seton-Watson, *The New Slovakia*, 99ff.

¹²⁹ Rychlík, Marzik and Bielik (eds), *Seton-Watson and His Relations with the Czechs and Slovaks*, pp. 412–13: 'The Situation in Slovakia and the Magyar Minority'. A large literature on the Minority treaties includes C. A. Macartney, *National States and National Minorities*, London, 1934; Richard Veatch, 'Minorities and the League of Nations', in *The League of Nations in Retrospect*, Berlin and New York, 1983, pp. 369–83; Carole Fink, 'Minority Rights as an International Question', *Contemporary European History*, 9, 3, 2000, pp. 385–400. For the Czech viewpoint, see Mark Cornwall, 'Dr Edvard Beneš and Czechoslovakia's German Minority, 1918–1943', in John Morison (ed.), *The Czech and Slovak Experience*, London, 1992, pp. 175–83.

¹³⁰ Seton-Watson, 'The Issues of the War', pp. 259, 265.

¹³¹ Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe*, p. 436.

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.¹³²

He brought a similar mixture of pragmatism and idealism even to the fate of his beloved Slovaks, for that race’s natural process of evolution — in a stage some way behind that of the Czechs¹³³ — 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 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.’¹³⁴ With this in mind, he continued in the interwar years to be relatively optimistic. It was a different picture in Yugoslavia and Romania, where as a Scot he worried about overt centralization and was mainly sympathetic to the national grievances of Croatia and Transylvania respectively.¹³⁵ In those two states he identified the mistakes of the Habsburg monarchy (or of pre-war Hungary) being repeated. There was, as Pieter Judson has recently argued, a new imperialism which prevailed in the ‘national states’ of the New Europe.¹³⁶

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 inclined him towards deep-seated anti-Magyar prejudices. But alongside his idealistic blind spots, we should note 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.¹³⁷

¹³² Seton-Watson, ‘The Issues of the War’, pp. 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, 2002, pp. 77–86.

¹³³ Seton-Watson, *The New Slovakia*, p. 6.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 129–30.

¹³⁵ Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe*, pp. 420–21. His conception of Yugoslavia now was, as in Britain, three nations developing together within one state: Seton-Watson et al (eds), *Seton-Watson and the Yugoslavs*, 1, p. 36.

¹³⁶ Judson, *The Habsburg Empire*, pp. 444–50.

¹³⁷ Seton-Watson, ‘Austria-Hungary and the Southern Slavs’, pp. 135–36, 157:

Their interpretation of their 'nation' was, in his view, dangerously warped as it had paid no heed to the progressive national forces of the time. He himself had desperately hoped that the monarchy, through reforms and restructuring, would survive to fulfil its mission both towards its peoples and as a key fulcrum of stability in the European states system.

Such a stable unit was the ideal which he would 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 and Transylvania 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'.¹³⁸

Some nationalist critics have always claimed that Seton-Watson was a meddling outsider who failed to properly understand their particular national mission. In fact he was quite a well-informed observer, a contemporary British historian who was trying to reconcile the many national causes erupting in the same Habsburg space. Drawing sub-consciously on the British civic-ethnic national model, he was bold enough to propose a mixture of pragmatic and idealistic solutions to the reality of East-Central Europe's 'racial diversity'. As Gyula Szekfű once noted, the historian on a higher level has his own mission to direct national opinion.¹³⁹ Seton-Watson did so, and remains controversial because, as a Westerner, he sought to counsel a range of competing regional audiences. Convinced about the force of national evolution, he nevertheless proved generally flexible and willing to learn in the face of some blunt nationalist responses. It was quite natural that only some of the audiences welcomed his advice or were satisfied with the new national edifices that were erected on the ruins of Austria-Hungary.

Magyarization 'has led directly to the present conflagration'.

¹³⁸ Rychlík, Marzik and Bielik (eds), *Seton-Watson and His Relations with the Czechs and Slovaks*, pp. 628–30: 'The Zone of Small Nations in Eastern Europe' (June 1943).

¹³⁹ Dennis Deletant and Harry Hanak (eds), *Historians as Nation-Builders: Central and South-East Europe*, London, 1988, p. 126.