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*Nationality before Internationalism in the Age of Empire: Robert W. Seton-Watson and the Shifting Landscape of Eastern Europe, 1900–1940**

The twentieth century began with empires under strain and ended with their legacies fiercely contested. For Robert W. Seton-Watson (1879–1951), one of Britain's most influential commentators on eastern Europe, the central challenge was how to reconcile nationalism, liberalism and imperialism in an age of political fragmentation. This article revisits his international thought as a window onto the dilemmas of imperial reform and national self-determination. Combining historical scholarship with liberal political advocacy, Seton-Watson forged an extensive network of contacts across eastern Europe and became a key intermediary between Britain's policymakers and some of the region's political elites. His writings and activism offer a rich vantage point for understanding how British observers engaged with the reconfiguration of the Habsburg and Ottoman imperial space in the early twentieth century.¹

Seton-Watson's political interventions and historical writings have long shaped scholarly understandings of Britain's entanglements with Continental Europe.² He has also been regarded as one of the pioneers of a long-standing historiographical approach, viewing the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy teleologically as a story of a predetermined collapse originating from unresolved ethnic conflicts and the tensions

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1. A.J.P. Taylor, *The Trouble Makers: Dissent over Foreign Policy, 1792–1939* (London, 1957), p. 96; R.J. Evans, *Cosmopolitan Islanders: British Historians and the European Continent* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 106–7; R.J.W. Evans, 'The Creighton Century: British Historians and Europe, 1907–2007', *Historical Research*, lxxxii (2009), pp. 320–39, at 32; G. Giannakopoulos, *The Interpreters: British Internationalism and Empire in Southeastern Europe (1870–1930)* (Manchester, 2025).

2. D. Bakic, *Britain and Interwar Danubian Europe: Foreign Policy and Security Challenges, 1919–1936* (London, 2017); E. Michail, *The British and the Balkans: Forming Images of Foreign Lands, 1900–1950* (London, 2011); R.J.W. Evans, ed., *Great Britain and Central Europe, 1867–1914* (Bratislava, 2002); M. Cornwall, *The Undermining of Austria-Hungary: The Battle for Hearts and Minds* (London, 2000); K. Calder, *Britain and the Origins of the New Europe 1914–1918* (Cambridge, 1972), p. 18; H. Hanak, *Great Britain and Austria-Hungary during the First World War: A Study in the Formation of Public Opinion* (Oxford, 1962); N.J. Miller, 'R.W. Seton-Watson and Serbia During the Re-emergence of Yugoslavism, 1903–1914', *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism*, xv (1988), pp. 59–69; N.M. Wingfield, 'The Historian as a Political Force in East Central Europe: R.W. Seton-Watson and the Anglo-American Public Opinion concerning Czechoslovakia in the Inter-war Period', in E. Schmidt-Hartmann and S.B. Winters, eds, *Grossbritannien, die USA und die böhmischen Länder, 1848–1938/Great Britain, the United States and the Bohemian Lands, 1848–1938* (Munich, 1991), pp. 132–42; S. Matković, 'Ivo Pilar and Robert William Seton-Watson: Two Political Viewpoints on the Southern Slav Question', *Croatian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, ii, no. 2 (2006), pp. 17–42.

of autocratic rule.³ In recent years this explanatory framework has been replaced by a rival historiographical orthodoxy which argues for the essential stability of the imperial and constitutional system of the Habsburg state and views the empire as an evolving multinational constitutional polity.⁴ Seen from this perspective, the British and the Habsburg empires had much more in common than British observers were willing to acknowledge.⁵

This recent paradigm shift in the historiography of the Habsburg empire renders possible a critical assessment of Seton-Watson's engagement with national questions in eastern Europe.⁶ His Continental writings should be read as responses to a set of imperial and national challenges that reverberated across Britain and Europe—challenges that centred on the future of imperial unity, the meaning of democracy, and the relationship between liberty and national self-government. It was through his responses to these dilemmas that Seton-Watson articulated a political vision shaped by the legacy of nineteenth-century liberal nationalism. He continued to view eastern Europe as a space of unresolved national conflicts in search of orderly and just solutions—often projecting onto it the moral and institutional frameworks of the British imperial experience.

Despite the substantial documentation of his activities, especially during the First World War,⁷ there is no comprehensive account of his thinking on democracy, nationalism and empire—themes that consumed Seton-Watson's thought and liberal activism for more than four decades.⁸ Building on earlier work by Harry Hanak, László Péter

3. J. Deak and J.E. Gumz, 'How to Break a State: The Habsburg Monarchy's Internal War, 1914–1918', *American Historical Review*, cxxii (2017), pp. 1105–136; see also H.W. Steed, *The Habsburg Monarchy* (London, 1913); L.B. Namier, 'The Downfall of the Habsburg Monarchy', in H.W.V. Temperley, ed., *A History of the Peace Conference of Paris*, IV (London, 1921), pp. 58–119; O. Jászi, *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy* (Chicago, IL, 1929).

4. M. Cornwall, ed., *The Last Years of Austria–Hungary: A Multi-National Experiment in Early Twentieth-Century Europe* (1990; rev. and exp. Exeter, 2002); T. Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1948* (Ithaca, NY, 2008); J. Deak, *Forging a Multinational State: State Making in Imperial Austria from the Enlightenment to the First World War* (Stanford, CA, 2014); P.M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge, MA, 2016); P. Miller and C. Morelon, eds, *Embers of Empire: Continuity and Rupture in the Habsburg Successor States after 1918* (New York, 2018); A. Körner, 'Beyond Nation-States: New Perspectives on the Habsburg Empire', *European History Quarterly*, xlviii (2018), pp. 516–33; C. Bryant, 'Habsburg History, Eastern European History ... Central European History?', *Central European History*, li (2018), pp. 56–65.

5. B. Gammerl, *Subjects, Citizens and Others: Administering Ethnic Heterogeneity in the British and Habsburg Empires, 1867–1918* (Oxford, 2018).

6. In this article I employ the term 'eastern Europe' to refer to the space that is otherwise known as east-central Europe and south-eastern Europe. For a discussion of the conceptual underpinnings of European regions and boundaries, see D. Miskhova and B. Trenscényi, eds, *European Regions and Boundaries: A Conceptual History* (Oxford, 2017).

7. For the most complete account of Seton-Watson's thought during the First World War, see H. Seton-Watson and C. Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe: R.W. Seton-Watson and the Last Years of Austria–Hungary* (Seattle, WA, 1981).

8. Partial critical appreciations are to be found in H. Hanak, 'The Early Life of Scotus Viator', *Contemporary Review*, cc (1961), pp. 539–42; L. Péter, 'R.W. Seton-Watson's Changing Views on

and others, Mark Cornwall has recently offered a convincing, yet partial, analysis of Seton-Watson's thought. Cornwall argues that Seton-Watson put forward a 'primordial' view of the nation as a linguistic and cultural unit capable of becoming a vehicle for progressive politics, and that his projected solutions to the various nationalist conflicts in eastern Europe fused pragmatism with idealism.⁹ Crucially, Cornwall notes that Seton-Watson's commentary projected an idealised view of Britain as a beacon of liberty for central and eastern Europe.¹⁰

Seton-Watson's thought presents an instructive case-study of the conceptual affinities, and cognitive dissonances, between debates on state- and nation-building in Continental Europe and discussions of nationalism and imperial order in Britain.¹¹ By tracking his commentary over four decades, I make three key claims. First, I argue that Seton-Watson's writings make manifest a core feature of liberal nationalism—the belief in the essential compatibility of nationalism with internationalist and imperialist commitments. Secondly, I show how his commentary and evolving 'solutions' to Continental national questions projected 'British' liberal values in the Habsburg and post-Habsburg imperial space of central and eastern Europe. Thirdly, I maintain that the shifting landscape of eastern Europe offered Seton-Watson the opportunity to affirm his own British imperial identity and allowed him to make sense of domestic questions challenging the unity of the British Isles, such as the issue of Irish (and Scottish) Home Rule. A critical reading of his writings on eastern Europe and his sporadic commentary on Scotland and Ireland lays bare an orientalist vision of the world structured around idealised understandings of British liberty.¹²

The analysis unfolds in four parts, tracing the evolution of Seton-Watson's political thought across shifting imperial and international landscapes. The first section outlines Seton-Watson's involvement with Habsburg politics and considers the dynamic interplay between his histories of the region and British debates on imperial unity in the early

the National Question of the Habsburg Monarchy and the European Balance of Power', *Slavonic and East European Review*, lxxxii (2004), pp. 655–79.

9. M. Cornwall, 'R.W. Seton-Watson and Nation-Building Clashes in Late Habsburg Space', *Slavonic and East European Review*, c (2022), pp. 65–94. See also J. Breuilly, 'Historians and the Nation', in P. Burke, ed., *History and Historians in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 55–87; C. King, 'Nations and Nationalism in British Political Studies', in B. Barry and A. Brown, eds, *The British Study of Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 313–45; D. Deletant and H. Hanak, eds, *Historians as Nation-Builders: Central and South-East Europe* (Basingstoke, 1988).

10. On this point, see also L. Wolff, 'The Western Representation of Eastern Europe on the Eve of World War I: Mediated Encounters and Intellectual expertise in Dalmatia, Albania and Macedonia', *Journal of Modern History*, lxxxvi (2014), pp. 387–407.

11. H. Case, *The Age of Questions, or, A First Attempt at an Aggregate History of the Eastern, Social, Woman, American, Jewish, Polish, Bullion, Tuberculosis, and Many Other Questions over the Nineteenth Century, and Beyond* (Princeton, NJ, 2018).

12. See also J. Morefield, *Empires without Imperialism: Anglo-American Decline and the Politics of Deflection* (Oxford, 2014); D. Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future World Order, 1860–1900* (Princeton, NJ, 2007).

1900s. The second section turns to the long decade of regional and international conflict starting with the outbreak of the Balkan wars. It analyses the ideas underpinning Seton-Watson's transformation from a defender of the Habsburg imperial state to one of Austria-Hungary's fiercest critics. The third part retraces Seton-Watson's steps in the 'successor states' of eastern Europe in the 1920s and argues that—despite the post-imperial transformation of the region—his thinking on nationhood, democracy and empire remained relatively stable, carrying Victorian conceptions of nationality and empire into the twentieth century. Finally, the fourth section analyses his historical work and political commentary in the 1930s and early 1940s. It argues that his celebrated diplomatic history of the 'Eastern Question' epitomised a call for a new moralism to redress the crisis of liberalism in Britain and the rise of authoritarianism in Europe.

I

Robert W. Seton-Watson was born in London in 1879 and grew up in Scotland in an affluent and pious household. The Scottish contribution to the British imperial project shaped his family's fortune: his father was a tea merchant in Calcutta and his mother's family descended from officers in the East India Company. Seton-Watson's Scottish heritage therefore became the foundation of a British imperial identity further cultivated by his elite education at Winchester and Oxford.¹³ Frequent travels to the Continent and linguistic competence in German, French and Italian constituted a second key feature of his upbringing and defined his transformation into one of Britain's 'cosmopolitan islanders'.¹⁴

In the early 1900s, Seton-Watson's writings were shaped by Continental politics and questions of imperial and international order. Encouraged by his Oxford tutor Herbert Fisher, he used his early contributions in the press to challenge the rise of popular anti-Germanism in British public opinion.¹⁵ Drawing from the racialised language of late Victorian and Edwardian political thought—especially ideas of Anglo-Saxon unity—Seton-Watson defended Germany's right to imperial expansion.¹⁶ He portrayed close co-operation between

13. R.W. Seton-Watson, *Scotland Forever! And Other Poems* (Edinburgh, 1898). See also T. Devine, *Independence or Union? Scotland's Past and Scotland's Present* (London, 2016), p. 99.

14. Evans, *Cosmopolitan Islanders*, pp. 106, 125; R.J.W. Evans, 'Creighton Century', pp. 320–39; Seton-Watson and Seton-Watson, *Making of a New Europe*, pp. 1–19.

15. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MSS Zimmern, 35/10, Seton-Watson to Alfred Zimmern, 7 Feb. 1935; London, School of Slavonic and East European Studies [hereafter SSEES], Seton-Watson MSS, SEW/10/07/03, H.A.L. Fisher to Seton-Watson, 6 June 1901.

16. R.W. Seton-Watson, 'The Relations of Great Britain and Germany', *The Spectator*, 27 May 1905; id., 'A Necessary Sequel to the "Entente Cordiale"', *The Spectator*, 9 Sept. 1905; id., 'Anglo-German Relations', *The Spectator*, 30 Dec. 1905. See Péter, 'R.W. Seton-Watson's Changing Views', p. 653; Hanak, 'Early Life of Scotus Viator', pp. 539–42. See also Bell, *Idea of Greater Britain*, pp.

Germany, France and Britain as the foundation for peace and stability in Europe.

In the mid-1900s, Seton-Watson's attention turned to the Habsburg imperial setting. A research trip to Vienna to study the growth of protestantism in Austria–Hungary exposed the young historian to the constitutional conflicts at both ends of the Dual Monarchy, and shifted dramatically the scope of his activities.¹⁷ Demands for universal suffrage, tensions between the Hungarian parliament and the Habsburg Crown, and clashes between German, Czech and Italian students in Vienna raised doubts about the empire's stability.¹⁸ Following the suggestion of the *Times* correspondent in Vienna, Henry Wickham Steed, Seton-Watson travelled to Hungary to observe the electoral implementation of limited suffrage.¹⁹ Witnessing electoral fraud and the suppression of the linguistic and other democratic rights of the country's Slavonic populations inaugurated his lasting involvement with national questions in the region.²⁰

The tensions within the Habsburg imperial framework were part of a global moment of nationalist and democratic demands across Britain, Russia and the Ottoman empire. This moment brought to the fore multivalent projects of imperial reform seeking to accommodate national movements within imperial structures.²¹ In Britain, a cohort of liberal intellectuals and politicians coalesced around the Round Table movement—an Oxford-based 'pressure group' promoting ideas of imperial federation for the self-governing dominions of the British empire.²²

254–72; D. Bell, 'Beyond the Sovereign State: Isopolitan Citizenship, Race and Anglo-American Union', *Political Studies*, lxii (2014), pp. 418–34; D. Bell, 'Before the Democratic Peace: Racial Utopianism, Empire and the Abolition of War', *European Journal of International Relations*, xx (2014), pp. 647–70. On the state of German and British relations in Edwardian Britain, see S. Wallace, *War and the Image of Germany: British Academics, 1914–1918* (Edinburgh, 1988), p. 14; P. Kennedy, *The Rise of Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860–1914* (London, 1980), pp. 251–87; T.G. Otte, *The Foreign Office Mind: The Making of British Foreign Policy, 1865–1914* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 309. See also A. Rose, *Between Empire and Continent: British Foreign Policy before the First World War* (London, 2017); J. Rüger, *Heligoland: Britain, Germany and the Struggle for the North Sea* (Oxford, 2017).

17. [R.W. Seton-Watson], 'Racial Strifes in Austria-Hungary', *The Times*, 3 Oct. 1905, p. 5.

18. Bodleian Library, MSS Fisher, 59/26, Seton-Watson to H.A.L. Fisher, 18 Nov. 1905; [R.W. Seton-Watson], 'The Suffrage Movement in Austria–Hungary', *The Times*, 7 Nov. 1905, p. 5; *Review of Reviews*, Nov. 1905, p. 490; W. Steed, 'Austria–Hungary and Universal Suffrage', *The Times*, 7 Oct. 1905, p. 5.

19. SSEES, Seton-Watson MSS, SEW/17/26/6, Henry Wickham Steed to Seton-Watson, 4 May 1906.

20. Judson, *Habsburg Empire*, pp. 301–3. See also D. Drăghicescu, 'The Future of the Peoples in Hungary', *Contemporary Review*, lxxxvii (1905), pp. 583–99, at 585.

21. On east-central Europe, see B. Trencsényi, M. Janowski, M. Baár, M. Falina and M. Kopeček, *A History of Modern Political Thought in East Central Europe, I: Negotiating Modernity in the 'Long Nineteenth Century'* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 512–44. On Britain, see also C. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914* (London, 2014), pp. 212–19.

22. See Morefield, *Empires without Imperialism*; A. Bosco, *The Round Table Movement and the Fall of the 'Second' British Empire (1909–1919)* (Cambridge, 2017); E. Goldstein, 'The Round Table and the New Europe', *Round Table*, lxxxvii (1998), pp. 177–89; J. Kendle, *Ireland and the Federal Solution: The Debate over the United Kingdom Constitution, 1870–1920* (Kingston, ON, 1989).

Seton-Watson became involved with the politics and history of eastern Europe by discussing the challenges posed by nationalist demands to imperial structures in Britain and the Continent. By the end of the 1900s, writing under the *nom de plume* 'Scotus Viator' ('The Scottish Traveller'), Seton-Watson had become a leading commentator on the nationalist movements in the Habsburg lands. He was in frequent dialogue with key members of the Round Table movement, such as Alfred Zimmern. Seton-Watson's writings framed the national questions that arose in the Habsburg and Ottoman empires as problems requiring solutions. By dissecting his proposed solutions, we begin to see conceptual parallels with British imperial questions.

Seton-Watson's first letters from Hungary reflected the influence of nineteenth-century Hungarian liberalism on British debates about Home Rule.²³ Irish nationalists treated the *Ausgleich* as a model for redefining relations between Ireland and the rest of Great Britain.²⁴ British liberals looked to Croatia's autonomy under Hungarian rule as a potential template for resolving the Irish Question.²⁵ Seton-Watson, unsurprisingly, adopted the language of 'Home Rule' to describe the constitutional stand-off between the Hungarian parliament and the Habsburg Crown.²⁶ More broadly, his mission to protect and preserve the ethnic heterogeneity that existed in the Hungarian part of the Dual Monarchy should be understood in the context of the rise of the Home Rule movements in Scotland and Ireland. What was at stake in both cases was the protection of linguistic and cultural rights within the framework of imperial state structures.²⁷ 'If the nineteenth century has been the century of the *great* nations', Seton-Watson argued, 'the twentieth will be the century of the small nations'.²⁸ But the 'small nations' he sought to vindicate could only exist within great imperial states.

23. On British/English patriotism and Hungarian liberalism, see J. Parry, *The Politics of Patriotism: English Liberalism, National Identity and Europe, 1830–1866* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 172–220; Evans, ed., *Great Britain and Central Europe*, pp. 11–22; G. Claeys, 'Mazzini, Kossuth, and British Radicalism, 1848–1854', *Journal of British Studies*, xxviii (1989), pp. 225–61; H.S. Jones, 'The Idea of the National in Victorian Political Thought', *European Journal of Political Theory*, v (2006), pp. 12–21; G. Varouxakis, '"Great" versus "Small" Nations: Size and National Greatness in Victorian Political Thought', in D. Bell, ed., *Victorian Visions of Global Order: Empire and International Relations in Nineteenth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 135–59; P. Mandler, 'Race and Nation in Mid-Victorian Thought', in S. Collini, R. Whatmore and B. Young, eds, *History, Religion and Culture: British Intellectual History, 1750–1950* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 224–45; J. Stapleton, 'Citizenship versus Patriotism in Twentieth-Century England', *Historical Journal*, xlviii (2005), pp. 151–78, at 154.

24. A. Griffith, *The Resurrection of Hungary: A Parallel for Ireland* (Dublin, 1904); See also E.F. Biagini, *British Democracy and Irish Nationalism, 1876–1906* (Cambridge, 2007), p. 41.

25. J. Stapleton, 'Political Thought and National Identity in Britain, 1850–1950', in Collini, Whatmore and Young, eds, *History, Religion and Culture*, pp. 245–69, at 253.

26. Péter, 'R.W. Seton-Watson's Changing Views', p. 644.

27. Scotus Viator [R.W. Seton-Watson], 'The Slovaks', *The Spectator*, 2 Nov. 1907.

28. R.W. Seton-Watson, 'Preface', in D. Jurkovic, S. Hurban, M. Lichard and A. Kolisek, *Slovak Peasant Art and Melodies* (London, 1911), p. iv. My emphasis.

The tensions surrounding the 'national question' in the Habsburg empire often mirrored those in Britain, even if Seton-Watson hesitated to draw the comparison explicitly. The overstretched nature of both imperial systems and rising demands for self-government in the Dominions led Round Table imperial reformers to speak of a 'crisis of political coherence'.²⁹ 'Home Rule All Round' had become a practical and expedient way to resolve national and imperial questions in the British empire.³⁰ Similarly, the rising tide of democratic politics in *fin de siècle* Austria–Hungary had rendered the region a laboratory for federalist projects along socialist, conservative and liberal lines.³¹ One scholar has argued that the Hungarian policies of assimilation existed in a condition of 'contradictory simultaneity' with Austria's more pluralist approach to the question of national and political representation.³²

Seton-Watson's preferred solutions to the national questions in the Habsburg empire resonated with contemporary British debates on imperial unity and federation. Rejecting radical federalist schemes as incompatible with constitutional government,³³ he instead embraced the Austro-Marxist approach to managing national diversity—most notably Karl Renner's carefully formulated model of national and cultural autonomy.³⁴ The Austrian statesman sought to address nationalist claims to statehood by proposing the recognition of national entities as 'personal associations'. The attribution of 'legal personhood', he hoped, would render the national communities of the Dual Monarchy more visible in the empire's legal system.³⁵

Renner's theory of personal autonomy appealed to Seton-Watson because it connected with the question of church (dis)union that occupied much of Scotland's public life at the turn of the century.³⁶ The

29. Quoted in J. Morefield, 'An Education to Greece': The Round Table, Imperial Theory and the Uses of History', *History of Political Thought*, xxviii (2007), pp. 328–61, at 330. See also A. Zimmern, 'United Britain: A Study in 20th Century Imperialism' (1905), quoted in A. Bosco, *Round Table Movement*, p. 214.

30. D. Bell, *Idea of Greater Britain*, pp. 93–8. See also J.E. Kendle, 'The Round Table Movement and Home Rule All Round', *Historical Journal*, xxi (1968), pp. 332–53; J. Kendle, *The Round Table Movement and Imperial Union* (Toronto, ON, 1975).

31. Trencsényi et al., *History of Modern Political Thought in East Central Europe*, i, pp. 308, 317; Case, *Age of Questions*, pp. 135–52.

32. Gammerl, *Subjects, Citizens and Others*, p. 97.

33. See A.C. Popovici, *Die Vereinigten Staaten von Groß-Österreich* (Leipzig, 1906); Scotus Viator, *Racial Problems in Hungary* (London, 1908), pp. 406–7.

34. Scotus Viator, *Racial Problems in Hungary*, pp. 406–8. See K. Renner, 'State and Nation', in E. Nimni, ed., *National Cultural Autonomy and Its Contemporary Critics* (London, 2005), pp. 13–42, and Scotus Viator, 'Political Prospects in Austria and Hungary II', *The Spectator*, 8 June 1907; Seton-Watson and Seton-Watson, *Making of a New Europe*, pp. 39–40, 52; Hanak, *Great Britain and Austria–Hungary*, p. 22.

35. Judson, *Habsburg Empire*, p. 294. See also Scotus Viator, *Racial Problems in Hungary*, pp. 407–8; R.W. Seton-Watson, *A History of the Roumanians: From Roman Times to the Completion of Unity* (Cambridge, 1934), p. 426.

36. Laicus Juvenis [R.W. Seton-Watson], 'Presbyterian Reunion: A Pressing Need', *The Scotchman*, 16 Oct. 1905, p. 9. See also D. Runciman, *Pluralism and the Personality of the State* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 89–150.

emphasis on the rights ascribed to collective entities had clear parallels with the organisation of religious denominations and their place in the state, as evidenced in the case of the Scottish Free Church. Renner's scheme, Seton-Watson argued, would 'solve' the 'national problem' in Austria-Hungary in a manner analogous to the settling of the church question in Scotland—by recognising the nationalities, like the churches, as 'corporate bodies in the State'.³⁷ The recognition of the legal personality of nations and churches alike would then facilitate national and religious unity and co-operation.³⁸ Two years into his studies on the national question in Austria-Hungary, Seton-Watson confided to his cousin that 'I have discovered what I always suspected, that the reason why the cause of the non-Magyar [*sic*] nationalities appeals to me so strongly is that I am a nationalist myself! ... a "Home Ruler all round"'.³⁹ The Hungarian policies of assimilation, he added, instructed Britain about how Ireland 'should not be treated'.⁴⁰ The eruption of the 'South Slav Question' in the aftermath of the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908 and the return of the Irish Question to the frontline of British politics prompted Seton-Watson to delve further into the questions of imperial unity and reform.⁴¹

Although Seton-Watson did not write explicitly about Irish affairs, the question of Irish Home Rule influenced his international thought. In 1911, he became an advisor to a parliamentary committee collecting information on the Irish Question from the point of view of 'devolution'.⁴² Comprised of liberals and liberal imperialists, the committee sought to resolve the impasse by supporting 'self-government for Ireland consistent with the unity of the Empire'.⁴³ Seton-Watson found himself caught in a web of contradictory liberal-imperial positions on the Irish Question.⁴⁴ Although committed in principle to self-government

37. Scotus Viator, *Racial Problems in Hungary*, p. 408.

38. Laicus Juvenis, 'Presbyterian Reunion'.

39. SSEES, Seton-Watson MSS, SEW/17/25/7, Seton-Watson to Malcolm Seton, c.1907.

40. Ibid.

41. R.W. Seton-Watson, *The Southern Slav Question and the Habsburg Monarchy* (London, 1911), p. 345. On the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina see R. Okey, *Taming Balkan Nationalism: The Habsburg 'Civilizing Mission' in Bosnia, 1878–1914* (Oxford, 2007). On the Irish question, see E. Biagini, 'The Third Home Rule Bill in British History', in G. Doherty, ed., *The Home Rule Crisis, 1912–1914* (Cork, 2014), pp. 412–42; G.K. Peatling, *British Opinion and Irish Self-Government, 1865–1925: From Unionism to Liberalism* (Dublin, 2001), pp. 53–91, 111–44.

42. B. Williams, ed., *Home Rule Problems* (London, 1911). See also S. Rosenbaum, ed., *Against Home Rule: The Case for the Union* (London, 1912).

43. Williams, ed., *Home Rule Problems*, p. 3. One of the group's members, the historian and editor of the *Contemporary Review* George Peabody Gooch, argued that 'the real union between the two countries will only begin when it rests on the unforced consent of the weaker member, and when scope is found for the national self-consciousness beneath the tolerant sovereignty of the British Crown': *ibid.*, p. 5.

44. The debate revolved around two main schemes, the 'federal' and the 'colonial' solutions. The former settlement prioritised the creation of regional parliaments across the United Kingdom, the latter the reform of the empire and the creation of an Irish Dominion following the model of the Union of South Africa. Those supporting more 'federal' solutions predicted the impending break-up of the United Kingdom in the event of Ireland achieving Dominion

and federalism—to ‘Home Rule All Round’—he feared that an autonomous Ireland would not protect the welfare of Ulster protestants and would therefore endanger the political integrity of the United Kingdom.⁴⁵

The Irish Question was broadly analogous to the South Slav Question, as both posed a challenge to imperial unity and sought a path to self-government that would preserve the integrity of the imperial state. Seton-Watson frequently sent books on the Irish Question to his Croat contacts—so much so that one of them mistook him for an ‘Irishman’.⁴⁶ The South Slav Question appeared to be more straightforward in Seton-Watson’s eyes than rival visions about the primacy of the Serbs and the Serbian state or Croat national culture allowed for. Serb, Croat and Slovene populations in the Dual Monarchy lived under at least four separate institutional frameworks. They enjoyed limited self-government in Croatia-Slavonia and minority status in the Hungarian assimilationist state; they were subjects of semi-colonial occupation in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and of economic exploitation in Dalmatia.⁴⁷ Seton-Watson’s proposed solution germinated while in contact with a group of mostly Dalmatian intellectuals and politicians who argued that forms of wider Croat–Serb unity should take precedence over Croatian state rights.⁴⁸ This corresponded to visions of a reformed ‘trialist’ Habsburg imperial state—with a Yugoslav component—resting on the ‘absolute equality’ of Serbs and Croats and their ‘essential unity as two inseparable elements in the life of a single nation’.⁴⁹ The kind of Serbo-Croat political unity that Seton-Watson envisaged was also modelled upon the Anglo-Scottish union within the framework of the United Kingdom. Serbs and Croats were seen as replicating an ideal model of Anglo-Scottish political nationhood, which could only thrive within an imperial state. A weakening of the Habsburg state structure, Seton-Watson argued, would signal ‘the

status. See Scotus Viator, *Britische Politik und Balkankrise* (Vienna, 1909); H.A.L. Fisher, *Political Unions: The Creighton Lecture* (Oxford, 1911), p. 7. See also Peatling, *British Opinion and Irish Self-Government*, pp. 71–4, 128; S. Dubow, ‘Colonial Nationalism, the Miller Kindergarten and the Rise of “South Africanism”, 1902–10’, *History Workshop Journal*, no. 43 (1997), pp. 53–86.

45. Seton-Watson and Seton-Watson, *Making of a New Europe*, pp. 89–90.

46. Quoted in Matković, ‘Ivo Pilar and Robert William Seton-Watson’, p. 23. Writing from Dubrovnik in January 1912, on the occasion of a celebratory banquet in his honour by the local Croat authorities, Seton-Watson rejoiced that his presence brought the competing political factions together, an event as remarkable as if ‘an Orange band in Belfast were to play Nationalist airs’: R.W. Seton-Watson and the Yugoslavs: *Correspondence, 1906–41*, ed. H. Seton-Watson et al. (2 vols, Zagreb, 1976), i, p. 88.

47. Trencsényi et al., *History of Modern Political Thought in East Central Europe*, i, p. 286–8, 532.

48. For background, see S. Matković, ‘Members of the Party of Right and the Idea of the Croat State during the First World War’, *Review of Croatian History*, iv (2008), pp. 27–36. Thanks to Lucija Balikić for this observation.

49. Seton-Watson, *Southern Slav Question*, pp. 341, 399. For more nuances, see Trencsényi et al., *History of Modern Political Thought in East Central Europe*, i, pp. 516–18, 533–55.

triumph of Eastern over Western culture and would be a fatal blow to progress and modern development throughout the Balkans'.⁵⁰

Seton-Watson's historical interpretation of current events had a tangible regional impact in central and eastern Europe: his books were translated into German and French.⁵¹ Slovak, Romanian and Croat nationalists regarded him as a key ally. Hungarian liberals, on the other hand, saw him as a 'personal enemy of the Hungarian state'.⁵² In amplifying their struggles for democracy, collective rights and political representation, Seton-Watson 'ventriloquised' the voices of his Slavonic interlocutors, most notably the Slovaks.⁵³ His orientalism is evident in his protracted quarrels with members of the Hungarian political elite. Hungarian liberals defended the policies of assimilation on the basis that the Hungarian state aimed at preserving state unity in a manner similar to the preservation of political unity within the British state.⁵⁴ They maintained that the state of affairs in Ireland deprived British commentators, such as Seton-Watson, of the moral right to pontificate about the treatment of minorities in Hungary.⁵⁵

For Seton-Watson the rift between Britain and Hungary represented a binary between western inclusive political nationhood and eastern exclusive ethnological nationalism; between a land of feudal privilege (Hungary) and a tolerant multinational commonwealth (Britain) undergoing a process of reform. The Austrians and Czechs mirrored British values in that they shared a responsibility to check Hungarian oppression, protect the smaller under-developed nationalities and ethnic minorities and set their kin states, such as Serbia and Romania, in the orbit of a federated monarchy.⁵⁶ The Austrian component of the Dual Monarchy had in eastern Europe a mission akin to the civilising mission of the British empire. Austria, Seton-Watson opined, was 'peculiarly fitted to manage Balkan peoples' and the Habsburg colonial

50. Seton-Watson, *Southern Slav Question*, p. 337.

51. Scotus Viator, *Die Zukunft Österreich-Ungarns und die Haltung der Großmächte* (Leipzig, 1908); id., *Politische Verfolgungen in Ungarn* (Wien, 1908); id., *Britische Politik und Balkankrise*; id., *Absolutismus in Kroatien* (Vienna, 1909).

52. SSEES, Seton-Watson MSS, SEW/17/10/5, Count A. Apponyi to T.C. Hope, 4 May 1908. See also Cambridge University Library, MS Butterfield 311, H.W.V. Temperley to Seton-Watson, [c.1908], Temperley to Seton-Watson, 25 Apr. 1909, and Temperley to Seton-Watson, 18 Oct. 1911. A.B. Yolland, 'The Constitutional Struggle of the Magyars: An Answer to "Scotus Viator" and Co' (London, 1905); J. Mailath, 'A Vindication of Hungary: A Reply to Scotus Viator and Other Writers' (London, 1908). See also P. Sherwood, 'An Englishman's Sixty Years in Hungary', *Angol Filológiai Tanulmányok/Hungarian Studies in English*, xi (1977), pp. 83–93; Hanak, *Great Britain and Austria-Hungary*, p. 161.

53. Wolff, 'Western Representation of Eastern Europe', pp. 387–9.

54. E. Reich, 'The Crisis in Hungary', *Contemporary Review*, lxxxvii (1905), pp. 522–3. See also Count A. Apponyi, 'The Army Question in Austria and Hungary', *Monthly Review*, xvi (1904), pp. 1–33; Count M. Esterházy, 'Hungary and Austria', *The Spectator*, 13 July 1907; id., 'The Case of the Slovaks', *The Spectator*, 7 Dec. 1907.

55. Esterházy, 'Case of the Slovaks'.

56. See Seton-Watson, *History of the Roumanians*, pp. 419–31. The book was written in 1934.

experiment in Bosnia elicited references to the workings of the British colonial administration in Egypt.⁵⁷

Having convinced himself that he was ‘only too often digging in an almost virgin soil’,⁵⁸ Seton-Watson understood his mission in moral terms as an obligation to represent the region’s small nationalities in both meanings of the term: to echo their sufferings, and to render aspects of their culture and life visible to a broader—western—audience through art exhibitions, intellectual exchanges and public displays.⁵⁹ The recovery of the region’s primitive cultures and indigenous art was expected to instil a sense of rootedness to modern cosmopolitan life in Britain and western Europe. Slovak peasant folklore, for instance, presented ‘a wealth of ornament which must be seen to be fully realised by us dull Westerners who have rejected the national costumes of our ancestors’.⁶⁰ The ‘simple’ motifs of Southern Slav art and sculpture expressed a ‘sense of nationality’ imbued with religious values offering a counterpoint to the ‘degenerate’ climate of European modernism.⁶¹

Seton-Watson’s federal vision for central and eastern Europe was motivated by two main considerations. As Pétér and Hanak have argued, one key motivation concerned the upholding of the balance of power in Europe. This explains his concern with the rise of anti-Germanism in Edwardian Britain, as well as his interest in the extent of the spread of pan-German ideology. Scant attention has been paid to a second dimension of his writings, namely, to the problem of how to accommodate national self-government within imperial states. In approaching this question, Seton-Watson’s thought synthesised nineteenth-century British and Continental debates on nationality; echoing Lord Acton’s formulations on nationalism in international politics, he believed that the sizeable multinational imperial state-form offered the optimum vessel for the protection of national/ethnic communities.⁶² Britain offered the blueprint for the coexistence of national and democratic rights. Consciously keeping apart the Habsburg and the British contexts, Seton-Watson’s

57. Scotus Viator, ‘Austria–Hungary, Italy, and the West Balkans’, *Contemporary Review*, xciii (1908), pp. 344–8, at 347; Seton-Watson, *Southern Slav Question*, p. 339.

58. R.W. Seton-Watson, *Europe in the Melting-Pot* (London, 1919), p. v.

59. R.W. Seton-Watson and his Relations with the Czechs and Slovaks: Documents, 1906–51, ed. J. Rychlík, T.D. Mazrik and M. Bielik (2 vols, Prague, 1995), i, p. 176, Seton-Watson to Fedor Ruppeldt, 21 Sept. 1911. See also SSEES, Seton-Watson MSS, SEW/17/3/5, W.T. Cairns to Seton-Watson, 18 Sept. 1910; T. Marzik, ‘A Splendid Scottish–Slovak Friendship: R.W. Seton-Watson and Fedor Ruppeldt’, in M. Cornwall and M. Frame, eds, *Scotland and the Slavs: Cultures in Contact* (Newtonville, MA, 2001), pp. 103–25. See also Wolff, ‘Western Representation of Eastern Europe’, p. 383.

60. R.W. Seton-Watson and his Relations with the Czechs and Slovaks, ed. Rychlík et al., i, pp. 167–70, at 167 (R.W. Seton-Watson, ‘Exhibition of Slovak Art’, [1911]).

61. R.W. Seton-Watson, ed., *Exhibition of Serbo-Croatian Artists* (London, 1917), pp. 4, 7–9.

62. Lord Acton, ‘Nationality’, in J.N. Figgis and R.V. Laurence, eds, *The History of Freedom and Other Essays* (London, 1907), pp. 270–301; T. Lang, ‘Lord Acton and the Insanity of Nationality’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, lxiii (2002), pp. 129–49. See also J. Stapleton, *Political Intellectuals and Public Identities in Britain since 1850* (Manchester, 2001), p. 31; C. Sylvest, *British Liberal Internationalism, 1880–1930: Making Progress?* (Manchester, 2009), pp. 174–94.

surveys of South Slav politics made manifest Britain's exceptionalism. This explains why, in the build-up to the First World War, he issued calls to the Hungarian political elite to replace their assimilationist policies with a 'British conception of citizenship which takes 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'.⁶³

II

Seton-Watson's engagement with the various national questions in the Habsburg lands culminated in plans for the inauguration of a periodical publication tentatively titled *The Interpreter*. Scheduled to launch in November 1914, the journal aimed to celebrate ethnic and national diversity across Europe, and 'encourage national individuality, wherever found'.⁶⁴ Drawing on a network of regional collaborators, *The Interpreter* aimed to 'break down the barrier of language' and open up an international—primarily anglophone—public sphere in which Continental 'races' could be rendered visible to 'western eyes'.⁶⁵ *The Interpreter* would also include discussions of the Irish Question intended to neutralise complaints from Seton-Watson's 'Continental critics' about forgetting 'the beam that is in mine own eye'; finally, Seton-Watson observed that the inclusion of articles on 'the sympathetic and healthy side of the 'Jewish Question' was meant 'to [be] at once fair play and good tactics'.⁶⁶

Seton-Watson's engagement with the 'Jewish Question' was shaped by a fundamental inability—or unwillingness—to grasp the position of assimilationist Hungarian Jews, particularly their participation in the Magyarisation policies that marginalised Slavonic populations. He struggled to reconcile their integrationist stance with his ideal of national individuality, often portraying them as complicit in ethnic oppression rather than as agents navigating complex imperial pressures. In his historical writings, Seton-Watson reproduced popular antisemitic stereotypes, invoking tropes of financial domination and national disloyalty.⁶⁷ He warned of the growing influence of 'Jewish financiers' in Hungary and speculated about the prospect of Hungary becoming 'a Zionist rather than a Magyar national state'. Despite his self-perception as a liberal and a champion of minority rights, his treatment of Jewish political and cultural life was marked by deep-seated biases that have received insufficient attention in the existing scholarship.⁶⁸

63. Seton-Watson, *Southern Slav Question*, p. 340.

64. SSEES, Seton-Watson MSS, SEW/2/1/1, R.W. Seton-Watson to May Seton-Watson, 1 June 1914.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid.

67. See also SSEES, Seton-Watson MSS, SEW/1/1/1 'First Impressions of Transylvania' (1906–7).

68. Scotus Viator, 'Hungary and Reaction', *The Spectator*, 20 July 1907; Seton-Watson, *South-Slav Question*, p. 340. As Pieter Judson has argued, popular antisemitism in Hungary 'served as

The outbreak of the First World War put an end to Seton-Watson's plans for *The Interpreter* and marked a significant turning point in his international thought. Since the outbreak of the Balkan wars in 1912 he had been acutely aware of the challenges of imperial reform in the Habsburg empire and the Ottoman–Habsburg borderlands. Yet a federal solution, as we have seen, remained his preferred option. This also framed his solution to the Balkan conflict: a federal Balkan state under Romanian hegemony. The privileging of Romania, which made Seton-Watson popular with Romanian nationalists, may be attributed to his perception that the Romanian political elite was friendlier than those of other regions to the preservation of the Habsburg empire.⁶⁹ His support for Romania and Serbia continued even after the Balkan states turned against each other during the second Balkan war, in contrast to the Bulgaphile and Albanophile writings of other British intellectuals and regional experts.⁷⁰

Serbia's military successes brought a drastic change in the tone of Seton-Watson's Habsburg commentary, which had been wary of the consequences of Serbian expansionism for the stability of Austria–Hungary.⁷¹ Serbia was now seen as undergoing a 'revival of national feeling', assuming the role of a 'Southern Slav Piedmont' for the South Slavs of the Habsburg Monarchy.⁷² The references to the Risorgimento did not change Seton-Watson's aversion to Serbia's political life; it denoted the country's renewed importance as a centre of gravity for the achievement of South Slav statehood.⁷³ Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to view Seton-Watson as a champion of a Greater Serbia. Prior

a language for the unfranchised to mobilize locally against the power of the established national elite': Judson, *Habsburg Empire*, p. 301.

69. Seton-Watson, *History of the Roumanians*, pp. 446–7. See also id., 'Austria-Hungary as a Balkan Power', *Contemporary Review*, cii (1912), pp. 801–6, and id., 'Hungary and the Southern Slavs', *Contemporary Review*, ci (1912), p. 830.

70. R.W. Seton-Watson, 'The Motives of Roumanian Policy', *The Nation*, 15 July 1913; R.W. Seton-Watson and the Romanians, ed. C. Bodea and H. Seton-Watson (2 vols, Bucharest, 1988), ii, p. 679. See also M.E. Durham, 'The Serb and the Albanian Frontiers', *Contemporary Review*, cii (1912), p. 801; H. Brailsford, 'The Autonomy of Albania', *The Nation*, xii, no. 13 (1913), pp. 566–7; N. Buxton, *With the Bulgarian Staff* (London, 1913), pp. 156–7; H. Nevinson, 'The Causes of Victory and the Spoils', *Contemporary Review*, ciii (1913), p. 10. Aubrey Herbert, the conservative MP and founder of the Anglo-Albanian society, made no efforts to conceal his contempt for the 'swine-breeding, queen-disemboweling Serbians'; see *Albania's Greatest Friend: Aubrey Herbert and the Making of Modern Albania. Diaries and Papers, 1904–1923*, ed. B.D. Destani and J. Tomes (London, 2011), p. 74.

71. Seton-Watson, 'Austria-Hungary as a Balkan Power', p. 805; R.W. Seton-Watson and the Yugoslavs, ed. Seton-Watson et al., i, p. 120.

72. R.W. Seton-Watson, 'New Phases of the Balkan Question', *Contemporary Review*, civ (1913), pp. 322–30, at 325–6, 328. See also Miller, 'R.W. Seton-Watson and Serbia', p. 62; Hanak, 'Early Life of Scotus Viator', p. 541. The idea that Serbia was the Piedmont of the Balkans—a place for national regeneration—had been introduced by W.T. Stead at the time of the Bulgarian agitation in the mid-1870s.

73. R.W. Seton-Watson and the Yugoslavs, ed. Seton-Watson et al., i, p. 165; Seton-Watson and Seton-Watson, *Making of a New Europe*, p. 76. The reference to Piedmont may have been influenced by the observations of Seton-Watson's travelling companion in the Balkans, the historian George Macaulay Trevelyan, whose scholarship shaped the legacy of the Italian Risorgimento

to the July Crisis of 1914, he hoped that the threat of Serbian expansionism would accelerate the process of federal reform in the Habsburg empire to avoid ‘abdication in favour of the Serbian, Roumanian and Boulgarian [*sic*] national States’.⁷⁴ The assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand put an end to the prospects of imperial reform in Austria–Hungary. Seton-Watson lamented the moment that he ‘had touched the Southern Slav question’.⁷⁵ In an earlier study of the South Slav Question, Seton-Watson had somewhat prophetically argued that the political unity of Serbs and Croats outside the framework of the Habsburg state could only be attained ‘through universal war and a thorough revision of the map of Europe’.⁷⁶

The outbreak of the First World War, therefore, radically shifted Seton-Watson’s view of the question of imperial order in eastern Europe. The unravelling of the existing international order prompted him to abandon his federal solutions and adopt what he referred to as a more ‘radical solution’ to the nationality ‘problem’ in Austria–Hungary.⁷⁷ Long before the dismemberment of the Habsburg empire became a realistic policy option, Seton-Watson accommodated groups of émigrés and activists in London who were planning the independence of their states, in some cases against the wishes of the local populace.⁷⁸ Together with his wife, Marion (May), he co-founded the Serbian Relief Fund, produced maps of the region for the imperial reformers of the Round Table group and undertook the self-described ‘hopeless’ task of ‘explain[ing] the dual monarchy to a working-class public’.⁷⁹

in Edwardian Britain; Trevelyan waged a formidable campaign to change Serbia’s public image in Britain, playing up the qualities and tenaciousness of the Serbian peasants: G.M. Trevelyan, ‘A Holiday among the Servians [*sic*]’, *Contemporary Review*, cxiv (1913), pp. 153–64, at 158. See also J. Perkins, ‘Peasants and Politics: Re-thinking the British Imaginative Geography of the Balkans at the Time of the First World War’, *European History Quarterly*, xlvii (2017), pp. 55–77.

74. R.W. Seton-Watson, *German, Slav and Magyar: A Study in the Origins of the Great War* (London, 1916), p. 121.

75. R.W. Seton-Watson and *the Yugoslavs*, ed. Seton-Watson et al., i, pp. 106, 171–2.

76. Seton-Watson, *Southern Slav Question*, p. 338. See also R.W. Seton-Watson and *the Yugoslavs*, ed. Seton-Watson et al., p. 178.

77. New York, Columbia University Library, Jászi MS, Series I, R.W. Seton-Watson to Oszkár [Oscar] Jászi, 20 Nov. 1919.

78. B. Trencsényi, M. Kopeček, L. Lisjak Gabrijelčič, M. Falina, M. Baár, and M. Janowski, *A History of Modern Political Thought in East Central Europe, II: Negotiating Modernity in the ‘Short Twentieth Century’ and Beyond*, pt i: 1918–1968, (Oxford, 2018), p. 10.

79. Bodleian Library, MSS Zimmern, 14/74–5, Seton-Watson to Zimmern, 15 Sept. 1914. See also R.W. Seton-Watson, D. Wilson, A.E. Zimmern and A. Greenwood, *The War and Democracy* (London, 1914); R.W. Seton-Watson, *Serbia Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow: A School Address* (London, 1916); Seton-Watson and Seton-Watson, *Making of a New Europe*, p. 175; R.W. Seton-Watson and *the Yugoslavs*, ed. Seton-Watson et al., i, pp. 192–5 (R.W. Seton-Watson, ‘Memorandum: Conversation with Crown Prince Alexander’, 15 Jan. 1915); R.W. Seton-Watson and *the Romanians*, ed. Seton-Watson et al., ii, p. 706 (R.W. Seton-Watson, ‘Speech at the Banquet Given in his Honour in Bucharest’, 24 Jan. 1915); R.W. Seton-Watson and *the Yugoslavs*, ed. Seton-Watson et al., i, pp. 262–4 (R.M. Burrows and R.W. Seton-Watson to Members of Parliament, 28 Mar. 1916). See also SSEES, Seton-Watson MSS, SEW/17/3/3, Noel Buxton to Seton-Watson, 3 Mar. 1915.

During the war, Seton-Watson's most important regional interlocutor, and a key influence, was the Moravian intellectual and politician Tomáš Masaryk (1850–1937). Masaryk's international thought was balanced between a Herderian view of the nation as an autonomous-organic unit in international affairs and references to a liberal central European federalist tradition which harked back to the nineteenth-century Czech intellectual and politician František Palacký.⁸⁰ The war turned Masaryk from an advocate of regional autonomy and federal self-government for the crown lands of Bohemia, Silesia and Moravia, into one of the leading exponents of the empire's fragmentation.⁸¹ His grand strategy rested on the establishment of small national states in east-central Europe, forming a confederation of democratic buffers situated on the fault lines of east and west, between Germany and Russia.⁸²

Masaryk's geopolitical plans for a post-Habsburg future in central and eastern Europe connected with Seton-Watson's own ideas. Seton-Watson was pivotal in facilitating, and financing, Masaryk's relocation to London in 1915 as the inaugural professor at the School of Slavonic Studies.⁸³ For Seton-Watson, the war necessitated 'drastic' solutions to the national questions in the Habsburg lands. Federalism became the driving motor of such solutions. Regarding the South Slav Question, its 'natural solution', Seton-Watson now argued, was a 'federal union' between Croats, Serbs and Slovenes.⁸⁴ His new map of central and eastern Europe featured unproblematically federal entities, composite quasi-federal states (Czechoslovakia) and unitary nation-states (Romania).⁸⁵

During the war, mainstream British patriotism rested on the distinction between British ideas of liberty and German militarism.⁸⁶ In this context, British imperialism manifested itself as anti-nationalist; the empire appeared as a liberal association of national units in stark contrast to the spirit of Prussianism. Seton-Watson was now able to

80. D.B. Shillinglaw, *The Lectures of Professor T.G. Masaryk at the University of Chicago: Summer 1902* (London, 1978); *T.G. Masaryk's Kromeriz Lectures: Problem of a Small Nation*, ed. S.B. Day (Prague, 2010); R. Szporluk, *The Political Thought of Thomas G. Masaryk* (New York, 1981). On Palacký, see M. Baár, *Historians and Nationalism: East-Central Europe in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 298–9.

81. R.W. Seton-Watson, *Masaryk in England* (Cambridge, 1943).

82. T.G. Masaryk, *The Problem of Small Nations in the European Crisis* (London, 1915); T.G. Masaryk, *The New Europe: A Slav Viewpoint* (Washington, 1918). See also Trencsényi et al., *History of Modern Political Thought in East Central Europe*, i, pp. 624–7.

83. R.W. Seton-Watson and his *Relations with the Czechs and Slovaks*, ed. J. Rychlík et al., i, pp. 222–35 (Seton-Watson to T.G. Masaryk, 30 Apr. 1915). SSEES, Seton-Watson MSS, SEW/17/3/2, Seton-Watson to Burrows, 15 Mar. 1915; Burrows to Seton-Watson, 18 Mar. 1915; Seton-Watson to Burrows, 14 Sept. 1915.

84. R.W. Seton-Watson and the *Yugoslavs*, ed. Seton-Watson et al., i, pp. 199–205 (Seton-Watson to M. Grujić, 15 Mar. 1915). See also SSEES, Seton-Watson MSS, SEW/10/4/3, Seton-Watson to Stano, 22 Oct. 1937; R.W. Seton-Watson and the *Yugoslavs*, ed. Seton-Watson et al., i, p. 145.

85. R.W. Seton-Watson and the *Yugoslavs*, ed. Seton-Watson et al., i, p. 280 (Seton-Watson to H.A.L. Fisher, 9 Oct. 1916). See also Cornwall, *Undermining of Austria–Hungary*, pp. 173–220.

86. Wallace, *War and the Image of Germany*, pp. 43–74.

promote his new post-imperial vision of eastern Europe from a position of influence. Central to this was his role in securing funding for the newly established School of Slavonic Studies at King's College London, and in personally financing and editing the *New Europe* weekly from 1916 until 1921. The magazine became a more politicised version of *The Interpreter*, part of a wider propaganda machine for the support of anti-Habsburg political projects and the 'national emancipation' of central and eastern Europe as envisaged by Masaryk. It was positioned in the middle ground of the British political debate, between the 'jingoes' and the 'pacifists'.⁸⁷ *New Europe* featured contributions from Seton-Watson's Continental contacts and younger experts affiliated with the British foreign policy apparatus engaged in monitoring the political events in central and eastern Europe and the near Middle East.⁸⁸

Although the magazine's pro-Slav agenda diverged from the more pragmatic stance of official British policy on eastern Europe, it was among the first publications to advocate national self-determination in the region, well before the concept shaped the debate over Allied war aims. Despite varying interpretations of how the British political elite came to support the dissolution of Austria-Hungary, most scholars agree that *New Europe* played a key role in legitimising that outcome.⁸⁹ The magazine's vision carried a distinct imperial dimension. Conceived as a sister publication to *The Round Table*—the journal associated with the Round Table movement, which from 1916 had direct access to the Lloyd George government—*New Europe* promoted a vision of post-imperial Europe grounded in national self-government and liberal internationalism. Its editors even invited members of the Round Table to form a 'New Europe Society' to advance this agenda. Yet it was precisely the question of how self-determination should be applied in central and eastern Europe that exposed the fault lines between the two groups. The imperial reformers of the Round Table rejected *New Europe's* uncompromising call for the Habsburg empire's dissolution, arguing instead that national autonomy and imperial statehood were not inherently incompatible.

Despite these differences of perspective, Seton-Watson shared with Britain's imperial reformers, and the country's liberal mainstream, a fundamental belief in the anti-nationalist features of British imperialism.

87. London School of Economics, Wallas MS, 1/60, Ronald Burrows to Graham Wallas, 5 Oct. 1917.

88. E. Goldstein, 'The Foreign Office and Political Intelligence, 1918–1920', *Review of International Studies*, xiv (1988), pp. 275–88; A. Sharp, 'Some Relevant Historians—The Political Intelligence Department of the Foreign Office, 1918–20', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, xxxiv (1988), pp. 170–88; E. Goldstein, *Winning the Peace: British Diplomatic Strategy, Peace Planning and the Paris Peace Conference, 1916–1920* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 39, 41; K. Hamilton, 'The Pursuit of "Enlightened Patriotism": The British Foreign Office and Historical Researches During the Great War and Its Aftermath', *Historical Research*, lxi (1988), pp. 316–44.

89. K.J. Calder, *Britain and the Origins of a New Europe* (Cambridge, 1976); Hanak, *Great Britain and Austria-Hungary*.

The British empire appeared in his eyes as a free association of national units, in stark contrast to the spirit of Prussianism—a model for the harmonious coexistence of national identities. Britain had a moral obligation to implant the values and virtues that shaped its own political and imperial construction in eastern Europe, and the wider world.

In 1917, calls for peace without annexations from Russian revolutionaries and British pacifists created tensions within the ranks of *New Europe*, particularly after the publication of Lewis Namier's sympathetic portrait of Trotsky.⁹⁰ The revolutionary upheaval proved in Seton-Watson's mind the need to re-state British war aims 'in a form which would bring out the underlying democratic principle ... proclaiming our determination to secure to every nationality in Europe (whether as yet autonomous or not) the right to self-determination'.⁹¹ This right to self-determination looked back to the 'ideal of national Self-determination proclaimed long ago by the great Mazzini'.⁹²

New Europe reached the apex of its influence during the Peace Conference, famously making its way to Paris in the diplomatic bag of the British delegation. Seton-Watson attended the conference in an unofficial capacity, facilitating the representations of his regional political contacts and undertaking informal diplomatic duties in central Europe. He did his utmost to contribute to the transformation of Wilsonian self-determination into 'national self-determination'—a principle to be forcefully applied in central and eastern Europe—and he witnessed at first hand the emergence of the 'successor state' as an entity in international affairs.⁹³ In the aftermath of the Peace Conference, *New Europe* ceased publication. In the words of a diplomatic historian of the period, 'much of its important work was accomplished, having helped to inform the peace-making process and the acceptance of a new eastern Europe'.⁹⁴

Once the dust of propaganda had settled, Seton-Watson's tone was far from triumphant. Writing in 1919 to Oscar Jászi, one of his few remaining Hungarian correspondents, he confided that:

I do not pretend to be enamoured of the new situation and quite see many hardships and injustices have resulted from it. But I none the less believe that the necessary foundations are now laid, upon which it should be possible to carry out the necessary work of reconstruction.⁹⁵

90. L. Namier, 'Trotsky', *New Europe*, 17 Jan. 1918.

91. R.W. Seton-Watson and the *Yugoslavs*, ed. Seton-Watson et al., i, pp. 292–4.

92. R.W. Seton-Watson, 'Preface', in S. Tucic, *The Liberators: A Drama in Three Acts*, tr. F.S. Copeland (Stratford-Upon-Avon, 1918), p. x.

93. L.V. Smith, *Sovereignty at the Paris Peace Conference* (Oxford, 2018), p. 35.

94. E. Goldstein, 'Round Table and the New Europe'.

95. Jászi MS, Seton-Watson to Jászi, Section I, 20 Nov. 1919. See also O. Jászi, *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy* (Chicago, IL, 1929).

The war, therefore, had failed to solve the national questions in the region; it had merely placed the aim of national emancipation on a better footing.⁹⁶

The coming of the First World War thus rendered Seton-Watson's plans for the imperial reform of the Habsburg empire obsolete, and he became instead one of Britain's most vocal advocates of national self-determination in central and eastern Europe. His intellectual and political alliance with Masaryk allowed him to construct a narrative that legitimised the emergence of new successor states on the Continent and delegitimised the multinational and multicultural features of the Habsburg empire.⁹⁷

Yet the very imperial framework he had once sought to reform continued to shape how he viewed the post-Habsburg world. As the smoke of war cleared, Seton-Watson's attention turned to the challenges facing the newly established states—and to the question of whether the ideals of national self-determination could be reconciled with the demands of political stability, minority rights, and liberal governance in a radically altered European landscape.

III

On 2 November 1922, Seton-Watson delivered his inaugural lecture as Masaryk Professor of Central European History at King's College London. The endowment of the professorship, with funds from the Czechoslovak state, marked the expansion of the School of Slavonic Studies—a by-product of the wartime propaganda activities of Seton-Watson's circle.⁹⁸ Speaking in the presence of Masaryk (now president of Czechoslovakia), Seton-Watson pleaded for the consolidation of the 'experimental form' of regional studies.⁹⁹ Seton-Watson's scheme aspired to be both 'international' and 'cosmopolitan' in scope, fostering 'mutual interpretation between nation and nation'.¹⁰⁰ British scholars, Seton-Watson continued, were best suited to promote regional studies on the Continent; their objectivity derived from their detachment from the rival nationalities 'which jostle each other throughout the wide area of Central Europe'.¹⁰¹

As we have already seen, Seton-Watson's regional activities were far from impartial; and, in the period that followed, the school's activities

96. Case, *Age of Questions*, p. 101.

97. For an alternative conception of nationalism and political liberty, see A. Ng, *Nationalism and Political Liberty: Redlich, Namier and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford, 2010).

98. I.W. Roberts and R. Bartlett, *History of the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, 1915–2005* (London, 2009), pp. 15–17.

99. R.W. Seton-Watson, *The Historian as a Political Force in Central Europe* (London, 1922), p. 13.

100. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

101. *Ibid.*, p. 18. See also Evans, *Cosmopolitan Islanders*, p. 106.

were financially dependent on the Versailles victors. In the 1920s, the school did not promote Hungarian or Bulgarian studies and it did not offer any courses on Austrian politics and history. When, in 1923, the question of Hungarian linguistic instruction arose, Seton-Watson looked for a candidate 'entirely unconnected with politics ... to avoid plunging the University into the middle of a political feud'.¹⁰² He believed that the scholarship that he promoted had a moral duty to defend the dissolution of Austria-Hungary against the critics who regarded the national fragmentation and economic ruin of central and eastern Europe as a symptom of 'civilisational' decline.¹⁰³

In the early 1920s, British commentators who feared the erosion of imperial hierarchies and opposed the principle of 'racial equality' often described Europe's post-war condition in the language of civilisational decline.¹⁰⁴ They claimed that the continent had become 'Balkanised' or even 'Africanised'—epithets that conveyed anxieties about international disorder, political fragmentation, and the supposed spread of 'non-European' instability into the heart of Europe.¹⁰⁵ Central and eastern Europe, in particular, was depicted as a zone of dysfunction. Austin Harrison described it as 'a victimized cordon of semi-starving, non-economic units all thirsting for more territory and more credit ... quarrelling and blockading one another with tariff barriers, red tape and Balkanized policies of strangulation'.¹⁰⁶ John Maynard Keynes asserted that the post-war settlement had created 'innumerable new political frontiers ... between jealous, greedy, immature and economically incomplete nationalist States'.¹⁰⁷ In response to the national fragmentation of the region, experts resurrected nineteenth-century plans for the federal reconstruction of the economies of the Danube region with Vienna and Budapest seen as indispensable units.¹⁰⁸

The counter-argument from the supporters of the new international order in central and eastern Europe rested on the assumption that economic internationalism was predicated on national self-determination. Seton-Watson's friend, Alfred Zimmern, dismissed Keynes's ideas for

102. Columbia University Library, Jászi MS, Section I, Seton-Watson to Jászi, 5 Feb. 1923.

103. H.N. Brailsford, *After the Peace* (London, 1920), pp. 60–62.

104. At the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, Japan proposed a racial equality clause for inclusion in the League of Nations Covenant, seeking formal recognition of equal treatment for all 'races'. Although it received majority support, the clause was ultimately blocked by Britain and other powers, exposing the racial hierarchies embedded in the emerging international order.

105. A. Harrison, 'The Africanisation of Europe', *English Review*, xxx (Apr. 1920), pp. 542–8; S. Huddleston, 'Balkanisation and Federation', *Contemporary Review*, cxvi (July 1919), pp. 542–8. See also H.N. Brailsford, *Across the Blockade: A Record of Travels in Enemy Europe* (New York, 1919); E. Ashmead-Bartlett, *The Tragedy of Central Europe* (London, 1923).

106. Harrison, 'Africanisation of Europe', p. 367.

107. J.M. Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (New York, 1920), p. 266.

108. W. Goode, 'Austria', *Journal of the British Institute of International Affairs*, i, no. 2 (1922), pp. 35–54; W. Goode, 'The Rescue of Hungary', *Contemporary Review*, cxxvi (July 1924), pp. 18–27. See also M. Lojko, *Meddling in Middle Europe: Britain and the 'Lands Between', 1919–1925* (Budapest, 2006); Bakic, *Britain and Interwar Danubian Europe*.

a Free Trade Union in Central Europe. He exclaimed, with a dose of irony, that ‘you cannot, as English liberals fondly imagine, have political nationalism without custom houses’.¹⁰⁹ Zimmern upheld a new vision of economic co-operation which could be, at the same time, protectionist and internationalist.¹¹⁰ In a similar vein, Seton-Watson replied to those lamenting the ‘Balkanisation’ of central and eastern Europe by drawing attention to the purported ‘abnormal’ and ‘dynastic’ bond of union among the different nationalities comprising Austria–Hungary.¹¹¹ Echoing Zimmern, he argued that ‘if the League of Nations is the goal (and it must be the goal of all sensible students of foreign affairs) you must have your nations there, before you can form them into a League’.¹¹²

Having spent many years of his career wishing to ‘solve’ national questions, Seton-Watson would concede in the 1920s that the eastern European world was too diverse to be neatly parcelled out into nation-states; the existence of ethnic minorities on the ‘wrong’ side of borders was a matter of fact.¹¹³ The frontiers of the new Europe, Seton-Watson argued, represented a compromise between competing historical, geographical, ethnographical and economic claims.¹¹⁴ The ‘nationality question’, so hotly debated during the war, had now morphed into the ‘minority question’, denoting the existence of collective rights ascribed to national groups within states.¹¹⁵ Having rejected ‘radical’ solutions, such as population exchanges and forced dislocations, Seton-Watson failed to consider the problem systematically.¹¹⁶ His ruminations fluctuated between abstract appeals to ‘an enlightened and well-informed public opinion’, vague references to international oversight, and a dogmatic rejection of calls to overhaul the minority protection regime in eastern Europe.¹¹⁷

In his publications of the 1920s, Seton-Watson framed the post-war political landscape of eastern Europe as a contest between the forces of

109. A. Zimmern, *Europe in Convalescence* (London, 1922), p. 186.

110. See also F. Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation: Consumption, Civil Society and Commerce in Modern Britain* (Oxford, 2008), p. 265.

111. The assertion that the Dual Monarchy had become a prison house of nationalities had gained common currency among British liberals arguing that the war was fought for the liberation of the small nations of Europe. See A. Zimmern, *Nationality and Government* (London, 1919), p. 17.

112. R.W. Seton-Watson, *The Czechoslovak Republic* (Edinburgh, 1919), p. 2.

113. See also Case, *Age of Questions*.

114. R.W. Seton-Watson, *The Successors of Austria–Hungary* (London, 1921); R.W. Seton-Watson, *The Emancipation of South East Europe* (London, 1923).

115. See, among others, C. Fink, *Defending the Rights of Others: The Great Powers, the Jews, and International Minority Protection, 1878–1938* (Cambridge, 2006); M. Frank, *Making Minorities History: Population Transfer in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Oxford, 2016).

116. For a contrasting account, see C.A. Macartney, *National States and National Minorities* (Oxford, 1934).

117. R.W. Seton-Watson, ‘The Question of Minorities’, *Slavonic and East European Review*, xiv, no. 40 (1935), pp. 68–80; Macartney, *National States and National Minorities*, pp. 429–50.

an 'old' and a 'new' Europe—one that turned on the opposing logics of devolution and centralisation, and that ultimately shaped the region's capacity for liberal democracy. In most of the newly created 'successor states', such as Romania and Yugoslavia, it was the political elites of the 'old' Europe who retained power.¹¹⁸ Seton-Watson aligned himself with those factions resisting the centralising policies of the Bucharest government and the dominant Serbian leadership.¹¹⁹ A 1924 tour of Yugoslavia left him deeply disillusioned: 'more depressed than I ever was in the darkest days of the war ... Turkey and Austria-Hungary were incapable of solving the South Slav Question: The Serbs seem bent on proving themselves equally bankrupt'.¹²⁰ Yet, as before the First World War, he continued to defend Serbia and the South Slavs in the *Kriegsschuldfrage* (war guilt) debate and even resorted to polemical attacks on his critics—among them the pro-Albanian commentator Mary Edith Durham.¹²¹ Confronted with the assimilationist and centralising agendas of the new national governments, Seton-Watson denounced policies of 'denationalisation' as contrary to 'eugenic principles', insisting that 'wholesale assimilation distorts the national character of ... races'.¹²²

Seton-Watson's hopes largely rested on Czechoslovakia. A closer analysis of his Czechoslovak writings reveals both his liberal imperialism and the extent to which the Habsburg context continued to frame his understanding of the region. Despite the legitimate grievances of the German and Hungarian minorities, Seton-Watson viewed the Czech political elite, and consequently the Czechoslovak state, as transmitting liberal values in eastern Europe, following the lead of the British empire. He testified to the ability of the Czech political elite to educate the other half of the state and promote principles of national toleration and liberty in the wider region. In reference to the Hungarian minority demands, Seton-Watson's argumentation mirrored the Hungarian pre-war defence of the anti-Slav assimilationist policies that he had railed against. He therefore argued that the Czechoslovak state should allow for cultural liberties in so far as they did not undermine the unity

118. Trencsényi et al., *History of Modern Political Thought in East Central Europe*, ii, pp. 31–3. See also R.W. Seton-Watson, *The New Slovakia* (Prague, 1924), pp. 10, 32; Seton-Watson, *History of the Roumanians*, p. 549.

119. Trencsényi et al., *History of Modern Political Thought in East Central Europe*, ii, pp. 12–14, 36–41; D. Djokic, *Elusive Compromise: A History of Interwar Yugoslavia* (New York, 2007), pp. 20–21.

120. Columbia University Library, Jászi MS, Section I, Seton-Watson to Jászi, 9 Nov. 1929.

121. R.W. Seton-Watson, 'The Serajevo [*sic*] Crime: Review', *Slavonic Review*, iv, no. 11 (1925), pp. 513–520; id., *Sarajevo: A Study in the Origins of the Great War* (London, 1926). Much of the widely discussed recent historical scholarship on the origins of the Great War rehearsed the debate of the 1920s. See, for instance, I. Hull, *A Scrap of Paper: Breaking and Making International Law during the Great War* (Ithaca, NY, 2014), and C. Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London, 2012).

122. Seton-Watson, *New Slovakia*, pp. 55–6.

of the state.¹²³ In response to what a historian of Czechoslovakia has called the ‘growing Slovak desire for autonomy and resentment over perceived Czech colonialism in the Slovak lands’,¹²⁴ Seton-Watson urged the Slovak political elite to stay loyal to the new state. Instead of undermining the Czechoslovak state, the Slovaks ought to ‘be thankful that fate has made them dependent upon a race so efficient, so well educated and well-disciplined ... as the Czechs’.¹²⁵ Seton-Watson’s language of imperial duty was strikingly similar to the language justifying the mandates system: the Slovaks’ fate resembled the fate of the colonial subjects to be placed under protection and prepare them for the ‘gradual extension of self-government’.¹²⁶ What comes through in his Slovak commentary, in short, is the full extent of his imperial paternalism.¹²⁷

Faced with the irreconcilable tensions of post-war central and eastern Europe, Seton-Watson’s writings cast the region as a battleground between ‘old’ and ‘new’ political elites, and between centralised and decentralised bureaucratic visions. Unlike his pre-war commentary, his inter-war writings drew fewer parallels with Britain’s own imperial structure or the constitutional dilemmas facing the Dominions. Notably, he did not perceive any meaningful analogy between the failure of compromise in Ireland and the national questions confronting the Continent.¹²⁸ By contrast, in the 1920s and early 1930s, Catholic ideologues from the Slovak People’s Party actively invoked the Irish case in their campaign for Slovak autonomy. They accused the pro-Czechoslovak Protestant minority of betraying Slovak Home Rule—drawing pointed comparisons with the role of Ulster Protestants in undermining Irish autonomy.¹²⁹ These analogies, however, held little interest for Seton-Watson. He dismissed the Irish Civil War as the product of ‘causes inherent in the Irish pre-war situation and the relation between the two historic parties in Great Britain itself’.¹³⁰

Seton-Watson’s reading of the failings of liberal democratic structures in central and eastern Europe reflected an idealised view of Britain and the British empire as a tolerant multinational commonwealth, a model

123. Ibid., pp. 58–60.

124. A. Orzoff, ‘Interwar Democracy and the League of Nations’, in N. Doumanis, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of European History, 1914–1945* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 261–81, at 265. See also A. Orzoff, *Battle for the Castle: The Myth of Czechoslovakia in Europe, 1914–48* (Oxford, 2011). For a more nuanced view, see also Trencsényi et al., *History of Modern Political Thought in East Central Europe*, ii, pp. 33–6.

125. Seton-Watson, *New Slovakia*, p. 8.

126. Ibid., pp. 128–9.

127. Ibid.; R.W. Seton-Watson, ed., *Slovakia Then and Now: A Political Survey* (London, 1931). See also R.W. Seton-Watson and the *Yugoslavs*, ed. Seton-Watson, ii, p. 116 (Seton-Watson to I. Lupic-Vukic, 8 Feb. 1924).

128. For a different contemporaneous perspective, see A.J. Toynbee, *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey* (London, 1922).

129. I am grateful to Matej Hanula for bringing this to my attention.

130. Seton-Watson, *New Slovakia*, p. 115.

for liberal international order.¹³¹ British political life, in his view, had achieved a functional balance between autonomy and centralisation in key spheres such as education, justice and the economy. The new states of the Continent, he argued, would do well to emulate a similarly flexible model of nationality to that defined by a 'dual consciousness' that combined a 'narrower Scottish nationality' with a 'higher British citizenship enacting and transcending it'.¹³²

IV

From the mid-1920s onward, as central and eastern Europe faded from the priorities of British foreign policy, Seton-Watson's political influence began to decline.¹³³ Around this time, the School of Slavonic Studies gradually expanded its scope, incorporating the term 'East European' into its title—a change formalised in the early 1930s when it became an independent university institute.¹³⁴ Yet the School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies proved less influential than Seton-Watson had hoped. The onset of the global economic depression took a personal toll, and the unravelling of the liberal international order in the early 1930s left him in a state of profound pessimism, 'waiting meanwhile for this or that thing which I care about to blow up!'¹³⁵ In the face of the 'bankruptcy of democratic representation and liberal government' he started 'writ[ing] off' his 'friends in SE Europe'.¹³⁶

Alongside his commentary on the successor states, he started working on a wide-scale reconstruction of the history of British foreign policy towards Continental Europe during the nineteenth century, from 1815 to 1880. The project culminated in two major diplomatic history surveys published in tandem with accounts of the contemporary rise of authoritarianism on the Continent.¹³⁷ Seton-Watson's historical reconstructions displayed a liberal nostalgia for a bygone age. They served as a reminder that Britain had always been an integral part of the European system, supporting good government when liberal institutions were in danger of tyrannical take-over.¹³⁸ Seton-Watson's

131. For context, see Morefield, *Empires without Imperialism*.

132. Seton-Watson, *New Slovakia*, p. 122, 130.

133. For background, see G. Bátonyi, *Britain and Central Europe, 1918–1933* (Oxford, 1999).

134. I.W. Roberts and R. Bartlet, *History of the School of Slavonic and East European Studies 1915–2005* (London, 2009), pp. 19–26.

135. Bodleian Library, MSS Zimmern, 30/38, Seton-Watson to Zimmern, 14 June 1932.

136. Bodleian Library, MSS Zimmern, 30/119, Seton-Watson to Zimmern, 1 Oct. 1932.

137. R.W. Seton-Watson, *Disraeli, Gladstone and the Eastern Question* (London, 1935); id., *Britain in Europe, 1789–1914: A Survey in Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, 1937); id., *Britain and the Dictators: A Survey of Post-War British Policy* (London, 1938); id., *Munich and the Dictators: A Sequel to 'Britain and the Dictators'* (London, 1939).

138. Seton-Watson, *Britain in Europe, 1789–1914*, p. 649.

call for engagement in Continental affairs did not, however, amount to an abstract call for intervention. The question of intervention in the Spanish Civil War, which mobilised radical opinion in England, is a good example. In response to calls for intervention, Seton-Watson argued for British neutrality on the basis that opposing factions in Spain represented two 'equally false' competing ideologies.¹³⁹

Seton-Watson's diplomatic and political history of the Eastern Question, an outgrowth of his wider project, was emblematic of his thinking in the 1930s.¹⁴⁰ The volume offered a polyphonic account of the rivalry between Disraeli and Gladstone, making use of the Gladstone papers as well as secret documents obtained from the Russian embassy, which he had managed to copy before the Bolshevik takeover.¹⁴¹ The manuscript was completed in 1933 and the book was published two years later in a series edited by Lewis Namier.¹⁴² Its circulation coincided with the dramatic failings of the minority protection regime and the League of Nations more generally. It was among the first scholarly works to explore the impact of the Eastern Question on British politics and has remained influential among subsequent generations of diplomatic historians.¹⁴³ At the same time, the study helped construct and sustain the myth of a spontaneous wave of moral indignation in Britain following reports of Turkish atrocities in the 1870s.¹⁴⁴ Later scholarship has shown, however, that the Bulgarian atrocities campaign was not merely a humanitarian outcry but a calculated political strategy aimed at mobilising liberal opinion and facilitating the return of the Liberal Party to power.¹⁴⁵

Disraeli, Gladstone and the Eastern Question's narrative focused on the 'great men' of British politics. It glorified Gladstone's altruism and vilified Disraeli's 'Turcophilia', pitting the 'noble Scot' (Gladstone) against the 'Orientalized Jew' (Disraeli). Having the emerging middle classes on his side, Gladstone personified an appeal to a higher Christian ideal dictating the attribution of self-government to small (Christian) nations in the European system.¹⁴⁶ His 'would-be solution of the Eastern Question', the departure of the Turks from Europe, Seton-Watson argued, anticipated the Wilsonian internationalism of

139. Seton-Watson, *Britain and the Dictators*, p. 387.

140. Seton-Watson, *Disraeli, Gladstone and the Eastern Question*.

141. SSEES, Seton-Watson MSS, SEW/19/1/1.

142. Ibid.

143. M. Tusan, *Smyrna's Ashes: Humanitarianism, Genocide and the Birth of the Middle East* (Oakland, CA, 2012), pp. 16, 189–90. See also H. Temperley, 'The Bulgarian and Other Atrocities, 1875–8, in the Light of Historical Criticism', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, xvii (1931), pp. 105–46.

144. R. Gill, *Calculating Compassion: Humanity and Relief in War. Britain, 1870–1914* (Manchester, 2013), pp. 80–81.

145. Ibid., pp. 89–123; Tusan, *Smyrna's Ashes*.

146. Seton-Watson, *Disraeli, Gladstone and the Eastern Question*, p. 506.

the League of Nations. Seton-Watson's idealised portrayal of Gladstone provoked the irritation of the series editor, Lewis Namier. In private remarks, Namier warned that overt displays of personal bias risked undermining the quality of the work, urging Seton-Watson to 'keep down the Celt in yourself and be, for once, more of a Sassenach'.¹⁴⁷ Although Namier admitted to his own deep dislike of Gladstone, he suggested it was no greater than Seton-Watson's evident hostility toward Disraeli.

The book was well received in the press. Among its admirers was the veteran journalist and Balkan commentator Henry Nevinston, who praised its Christian liberal and humanitarian message and used the occasion to reflect on his own earlier involvement in the Macedonian Question.¹⁴⁸ However, some of the more expert reviewers raised doubts about Seton-Watson's objectivity. Harold Temperley argued that Seton-Watson showed 'more sympathy with Gladstone's principle of foreign policy than it deserves from an objective standpoint'.¹⁴⁹ The *Eastern Question* was a lament for the waning spirit of liberal humanitarianism informing British foreign policy. The book allowed Seton-Watson to articulate his nostalgia about an imaginary and abstract Christian European ideal threatened by the rise of authoritarianism and totalitarianism. Britain still had a moral obligation to defend eastern Europe while acting to avoid another world conflagration.

Seton-Watson's contemporary histories of the rise of European authoritarianism and totalitarianism focused on Stalin, Hitler and Mussolini. Much like his surveys of the successor states, the study of past and present politics recovered national psychologies embodied in the lives of 'Great Men'.¹⁵⁰ Seton-Watson noted Russian 'abnormality' and lack of a liberal tradition;¹⁵¹ the 'neurasthenia' of the Italian masses in the aftermath of the Great War; the 'upset mental balance' of the 'German nation' which had violently passed from '4 years of victory to utter downfall', giving rise to a 'militant National Socialist psychology' based on racialism. This was partly due to 'the harsh unwisdom of the allies': Seton-Watson had never been in full agreement with all aspects of the post-war settlement, as we have already seen.¹⁵²

147. SSEES, Seton-Watson MSS, SEW/19/1/1, Namier to Seton-Watson, 8 Jun. 1934.

148. H. Nevinston, 'Mighty Opposites', *London Mercury*, xxxi, no. 186 (1935), pp. 592–4. See also R.C.K. Ensor's review in *The Spectator*, 22 Mar. 1935; *The Times*, 7 Mar. 1935; *The Observer*, 7 Apr. 1935.

149. H. Temperley, 'New Light on Russia's Policy in Regard to the Eastern Question (1876–8)', *Contemporary Review*, cxlviii (1935), pp. 554–61, at 561.

150. Seton-Watson, *Britain and the Dictators*.

151. Seton-Watson's reading of the political developments in Russia has many affinities with the pre-Soviet pattern of discussion about Russian affairs in British liberal circles. Seton-Watson preferred Stalin's appeal to a nationalist Russian ideal with a constitutional veneer as against the Bolshevik resolve to destroy the liberal bourgeois state.

152. Seton-Watson, *Britain and the Dictators*, p. 39.

Seton-Watson's political commentary in the 1930s pleaded for a return to Christian values. He claimed that one of the biggest challenges posed by the rising tide of authoritarianism consisted of the prevalence of pagan and material values, marking a retreat from the Christian principles which had defined Europe. This was in part due to Britain's failure to project its own Christian liberal values abroad. This mode of thinking was in line with a wider turn in British political and international thought to Christianity.¹⁵³ Christian precepts were evoked to redress the failings of liberalism and liberal internationalism, and to defend the faltering liberal democratic world order.¹⁵⁴

Seton-Watson's recourse to the Eastern Question was essentially a call for the Christianisation of foreign policy and the reinvigoration of the spiritual core of liberalism. Faced with the rise of the German threat, Seton-Watson eschewed references to the League of Nations and collective security. As in his pre-war writings, he picked up the language of Great Power politics: he wrote favourably of the project of an Anglo-French *détente* with Germany by means of colonial appeasement and recognised Germany's legitimate economic interests in *Mitteleuropa*.¹⁵⁵ Yet in 1938 it was not the Yugoslav, but the Czechoslovak question that preoccupied him. He became increasingly anxious about the preservation of the unity of Czechoslovakia which, by the mid-thirties, had become an 'island in the dictatorial sea'. He directed his polemic against 'ill-informed' commentators, such as C.A. Macartney, who 'write and talk of Czechoslovakia as if she were the villain of the piece in minority questions'.¹⁵⁶

Seton-Watson's idiosyncratic support of the policy pursued by the British government in the late 1930s was reflected in the peculiar position which he took in the debate on appeasement. He ventured to combine elements of the realist thinking in contemporary political discourse with an abstract appeal to Christian morality.¹⁵⁷ Unwilling to acknowledge Germany's minority and territorial claims in eastern Europe, he attacked E.H. Carr's analysis on the basis that it rested on a materialist reading of power politics which led to nihilism. He counterposed a 'moral realism', which envisaged an international order firmly based

153. Stapleton, *Political Intellectuals and Public Identities*, pp. 63–78.

154. A.D. Lindsay, *Christianity and Economics* (London, 1933); L. Curtis, *Civitas Dei: The Commonwealth of God* (London, 1938); T.S. Elliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (New York, 1939); A. Zimmern, *Spiritual Values and World Affairs* (Oxford, 1939).

155. Seton-Watson, *Britain and the Dictators*, p. 410.

156. 'Czechoslovakia To-day', *Manchester Guardian*, 14 Dec. 1934, p. 7; R.W. Seton-Watson, 'Background to the Czech Problem', *Czechoslovak Broad sheets*, no. 1 (London, 1938), p. 1; See also C.A. Macartney, *Hungary: A Short History* (London, 1934); id., *Hungary and her Successors: The Treaty of Trianon and its Consequences, 1919–1937* (London, 1937). On Macartney, see M. Lojko, 'C.A. Macartney and Central Europe', *European Review of History/Revue européenne d'histoire*, vi (1999), pp. 37–57.

157. See I. Hall, *Dilemmas of Decline: British Intellectuals and World Politics* (Oakland, CA, 2012), pp. 432–3.

on Christian values.¹⁵⁸ Seton-Watson's formulations in *Britain and the Dictators*, first published in 1938, confused the reviewer of the *Observer*, who argued that 'the work could not be justly called a contribution to European appeasement' and that the author's more accommodating attitude towards Russia undermined his moral message.¹⁵⁹ On the other hand, his old acquaintance from the First World War, the diplomat Harold Nicolson, applauded the balance he struck between 'idealism' and 'realism'.¹⁶⁰

In response to the Munich crisis, Seton-Watson conceded the failure of his erstwhile 'reasoned defence' of the government's foreign policy. Munich had 'falsified' his thesis. Seton-Watson's prose became very personal, making accusations of 'treachery' and 'betrayal'. The government had betrayed 'the cause of liberty and collective security in Europe'.¹⁶¹ The policy of appeasement, in Seton-Watson's eyes, turned Chamberlain into Disraeli. The former's 'peace in our time' paralleled the Disraelian 'peace with honour'.¹⁶² The British stood idly by and saved their own skins by 'carving up the living body of another nation, after having first undermined its powers of resistance and rendered its surrender to brute force and a tyranny of lies inevitable'.¹⁶³ Much like the Berlin Congress in the 1870s, the Munich Agreement would not create peace; it would perpetuate tyranny.¹⁶⁴ Britain lacked political elites with the dexterity and moral calibre of Gladstone and Palmerston. However, even at the last hour, the option of appeasing Germany through colonial concessions was still on the table for him.¹⁶⁵

Faced with the outbreak of the Second World War, Seton-Watson's thinking turned backwards to the pre-1914 period and picked up the language of 'international anarchy'. Despite the 'evolution' of the small nations in the inter-war period, the 'defective frontiers' and the 'excess of zeal on behalf of the victors' had contributed to the resurfacing of 'European Anarchy'.¹⁶⁶ The task that lay in front of Britain as far as eastern Europe was concerned, Seton-Watson argued in 1940, consisted of a 'conservative programme of restoring the status quo which had a background of twenty-one years'.¹⁶⁷ And, in a similar manner to his

158. On the debate on appeasement, see D. Long and P. Wilson, eds, *Thinkers of the Twenty Years' Crisis: Inter-War Idealism Re-assessed* (Oxford, 1995).

159. *The Observer*, 1 Feb. 1938.

160. D. Drinkwater, *Sir Harold Nicolson and International Relations: The Practitioner as Theorist* (Oxford, 2004), p. 150.

161. Seton-Watson, *Britain and the Dictators*, p. ix.

162. Seton-Watson, *Disraeli, Gladstone and the Eastern Question*, p. 526.

163. Seton-Watson, *Munich and the Dictators*, p. 141.

164. *Ibid.*, pp. 134–46.

165. *Ibid.*, p. 168.

166. R.W. Seton-Watson, *The Problem of Small Nations and the European Anarchy* (Nottingham, 1939), p. 7. See also G.L. Dickinson, *The European Anarchy* (London, 1916).

167. SSEES, Seton-Watson MSS, SEW/12/3/1, R.W. Seton-Watson, 'Policy and Propaganda' [1940].

First World War writings, he began devising plans for a federal and confederal reconstitution of eastern Europe, this time placing his emphasis on the peasant question in the region.¹⁶⁸

The maverick of the *New Europe* magazine therefore sought to revive the Great War momentum of his involvement with the national questions on the Continent. However, his voice became increasingly marginalised in the new British foreign policy apparatus. Although, as an expert on south-eastern Europe, he reunited with some former *New Europe* contributors in the wartime Chatham House under Arnold Toynbee, he grew increasingly frustrated about his marginalised presence in the organisation of British intelligence and propaganda.¹⁶⁹ This did not stop him from attempting, unsuccessfully, to revive *New Europe* and create a platform for the 'small nations' of Europe within the framework of the Atlantic charter. The platform would assume the name 'New World' and consistently promote the 'federal principle' as a 'corrective to the exaggerated centralism of the recent past'.¹⁷⁰

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This article has traced Seton-Watson's international thought over the course of four decades—a period that witnessed the dissolution and transformation of imperial spaces in both Britain and Continental Europe, as well as the rise and fall of his influence as a political commentator and regional expert on eastern Europe. Seton-Watson has long been seen as a key anglophone proponent of an outdated narrative about the nature and collapse of Austria–Hungary. The criticism applies to his contributions to the historiography of the Eastern Question. Recent shifts in the historiography of the Habsburg state and the Eastern Question have opened new avenues for reassessment. Scholars are beginning to acknowledge that the British and the Habsburg empires had much more in common than what set them apart, and that there was nothing spontaneous or preordained in British popular support for the Christian populations inhabiting eastern Europe.

This revised historiographical landscape offers a fresh opportunity to revisit Seton-Watson's writings on national questions across eastern Europe in the first four decades of the twentieth century. His work offers a valuable case-study of the continuities and changes in British liberal nationalism and internationalism during a period marked by imperial crisis, intensified international co-operation, and mounting

168. SSEES, Seton-Watson MSS, SEW/12/3/3, R.W. Seton-Watson, 'Reconstruction of Eastern Europe' c.1942; SEW/12/3/4, Seton-Watson to Bruce Lockhart, 24 Apr. 1942.

169. SSEES, Seton-Watson MSS, SEW/12/1/1, Seton-Watson to Leeper, 26 July 1940. See also SEW/13/3/2, Toynbee to Seton-Watson, 23 Jan. 1940.

170. SSEES, Seton-Watson MSS, SEW/13/3/5, 'New World'.

nationalist agitation across Europe and beyond. Seton-Watson consistently framed eastern Europe as a space of unresolved national questions in search of viable solutions. He deployed historical narrative as a vehicle for liberal political advocacy, inscribing his political ideals into the histories he wrote. Yet he also cast eastern Europe as temporally 'behind' Britain—trapped in an earlier phase of political development and unable to match the constitutional maturity of the British state. In doing so, Seton-Watson projected a largely imagined, though widely shared, image of Britain and its empire—as an empire of toleration and a model for the international organisation of the modern world. He notably kept the Irish Question—the 'beam in the eye' of the British—at arm's length from analogous national struggles on the Continent. In contrast, he presented the British imperial system as a political formation grounded in the successful accommodation of national sentiment, particularly through the integration of Scottish identity within a broader framework of British citizenship. For Seton-Watson, it was this model of composite unity that gave the imperial order its moral authority and made it, in his eyes, an ideal to be emulated abroad.

The key concerns that shaped Seton-Watson's thought were imperial unity, democracy, liberty and national self-government. At the heart of his work lay the persistent tension between aspirations for national self-rule and the structural realities of a world still governed by imperial states. Before the First World War, his 'solutions' to the national questions in eastern Europe connected with the federalist discourse of British imperial reformers. During that war, and in its aftermath, his conceptual crusade against the *raison d'être* of the Habsburg empire turned him into an apologist for the new status quo in eastern Europe. Yet he was quick to recognise that the 'new Europe' he fought for was falling prey to pre-existing political and cultural divisions. The spectre of the Habsburg empire continued to haunt his post-war assessments of its successor states.

Throughout his engagement with international politics, Seton-Watson retained a Herderian commitment to the value of small nationalities embedded within larger political frameworks. This commitment informed his contemptuous view of the Ottoman Empire and Hungary, both of which he saw as guilty powers which needed to repent of their oppression of subject peoples. In the 1930s, he defended the status quo in eastern Europe with a quasi-religious zeal—one that extended even into his historical scholarship on the Eastern Question. Convinced that he was living in a disenchanted and materialist age, Seton-Watson's writing called for a return to spiritual and moral principles in international affairs. Nowhere was this more evident than in his response to the Munich Crisis, which, for him, marked the collapse of the European order he had long sought to uphold. By that point, his thinking had come full circle. In the 1940s, he appeared to be reliving the First World War—an intellectual remnant

of the nineteenth century, struggling to navigate an international landscape he no longer fully understood.

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