Nationalism in Eastern and Central Europe through the Eyes of Four British Scholars in the First Half of the Twentieth Century

Four Britons and Nationalism: Henry Wickham Steed, Robert William Seton-Watson, Arnold Joseph Toynbee and Carlile Aylmer Macartney in/on East-Central Europe and Beyond (1903–1978). By Ágnes Beretzky. Reno, Nevada: Helena History Press, 2024. Pp. xiii + 301. ISBN 978-1-943596-41-6.

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The first half of the twentieth century brought on tremendous changes in Central and Eastern Europe whose effects still linger on in the wider region. The liberating forces of nationalism first entered the world stage on a large scale in the mid-nineteenth century and were embodied in a wave of independence fights – Italy, France, the Netherlands, and the Habsburg Empire – that all failed to achieve the coveted freedom. The idea of becoming independent and sovereign at the national level did not disappear and came back with a renewed impulse before, during, and immediately after the First World War. This deeply ingrained sentiment was not only fervent in the Eastern part of the continent but, in sharp contrast, also largely incomprehensible in Western Europe. With the conclusion of the Paris Peace Conference and the various peace treaties in its wake, the former Austro-Hungarian Empire was gone and in its stead new successor states were born: Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Yugoslavia from 1928), and an enlarged Romania. In these countries – to a significant degree thanks to the large ethnic minorities forced to live under the jurisdiction of the majority – nationalism did not dissipate but actually became even more robust. The story is well known: a Germany thinking of itself as a victim of the peace treaties with the rise of Adolf Hitler stepped on the way of rectifying the imagined injustices, and Hungary – to a lesser extent – did the same. The Second World War and the Paris Peace Treaty of 1947 solidified the borders of 1919–1920, after which socialism forced a lid on the never-ending feeling of nationalism in the area.

Ágnes Beretzky's new volume focuses on the question of Central and Eastern European nationalism in the first half of the twentieth century from a special point of view. She sheds a light on four British individuals, scholars and journalists

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sometimes working for their government, who knew the region and its peoples intimately, and did everything within their power to disseminate their knowledge to a larger public. Robert William Seton-Watson was a historian of East-Central Europe and a long-time correspondent and later editor-in-chief of *The Times* (London); Henry Wickham Steed was also a world-renowned scholar and Director of the Royal Institute of International Affairs; similarly, the well-known historian Arnold Joseph Toynbee was a voice to reckon with; Carlile Aylmer Macartney, the fourth person in the focus of the study was another expert on the minorities of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire in general, and on Hungary in particular. A common feature of all four men was that they devoted a significant time of their lives to really get to know the peoples living in the larger area, and – even more crucially – to understand them. They visited these countries and even lived there for sometimes extended periods and learned the various languages spoken there. Therefore, they were well-versed in their historical, political and cultural questions, and could convey these and the aspirations of those living here to a wider English-speaking readership. What was also common in the four scholars was that they interpreted the situations that they encountered and formulated possible answers to them in different manners that were often in direct opposition to one another. They carried their biases into their work, which had a spillover effect when political decision makers accepted some of their recommendations.

Steed studied the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in Vienna and the various provinces of the Dual Monarchy in person from 1903. He came to the conclusion that the Magyar political establishment was forcibly trying to Magyarise the various ethnicities under its jurisdiction. He published a well-received book on the Monarchy and its minorities that made him the go-to expert regarding the problems of the Monarchy. Seton-Watson, for his part, arrived in Hungary in 1906. Similarly to Steed, he admired Lajos Kossuth and his ideas regarding national self-determination, but his time spent with Hungarian politicians and his tours in Slovakia and Transylvania – giving him the nickname *Scotus Viator* – convinced him that the Hungarian government was reactionary and tried to oppress the various ethnicities living on its territory. His soon published book made him a celebrated expert on Hungary, although, as the author comments, his writings contained "several unbalanced conclusions" (26). By the time the First World War started, these two men had an emphatic dislike toward what they judged a chauvinistic Hungary. During the war they were "particularly involved in pro-Serbian activities" (37), and were determined that the Germans and the Hungarians must be punished as instigators for the conflagration, while the Slavic peoples needed their own respective sovereign home countries. Toynbee, as a historian studying the question of nationalism in the wider region, also became a household name in academia

that was often used as aid for governmental propaganda or postwar planning. After the war these historians' voices became influential as to the outcome of the peace treaties. One of the main efforts was to create self-sustaining successor states in the place of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in the Danube valley.

The second chapter is the main thrust of the book, which covers the period between 1920 and 1947, that is, from signing the Paris peace treaties after the First World War to the Paris Peace Treaty codifying the international landscape after the Second World War. The four Britons had various roles and attitudes to the interwar years and the Second World War concerning the Danubian region. The main problem with the peace treaties after the First World War was that they created nation states that were too weak and could only survive with the backing of France and, to a lesser degree, of Great Britain. By the 1930s it was obvious that changes would and should occur because the status quo was unsustainable in the long run. Still, out of the four protagonists, only Toynbee was willing to reconsider his earlier opinion; Steed and Seton-Watson, however, were never willing to give up the new world order that they helped to create.

Steed and Seton-Watson predictably defended the postwar order and tried to prove that the Monarchy came to an end due to internal processes (as opposed to the Allies' activities), and therefore it was the result of organic development on the part of the formerly oppressed minorities seeking to establish their own sovereign homeland. The two authors welcomed the birth of the Little Entente as a stabilising force against irredentist Hungarian whims. Their grand project – the unification of the northern and southern Slavs in what became Czechoslovakia and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes – did not leave them fully satisfied, mainly because of what was fermenting in Yugoslavia, but they held onto their vision that this configuration of states provided lasting peace. It has to be mentioned to their credit that the minority question in these countries filled them with some despair and they wrote to the various heads of state in order to try to achieve better circumstances. As to Hungary, they had no contact with interwar Hungarians on the inside and talked only to members of the October emigration (those of the Károlyi people), and they vehemently opposed any border rectification. Toynbee was mostly concentrating on Turkey and questions related to that country, so he professed views on Hungary less frequently, but when he did, as in the case of the Romanian-Hungarian Optant Debate, he held a balanced view and stayed on neutral grounds.

In contrast, Macartney became a source of frequent scholarly opinion about Hungary and Hungarian affairs. He was somewhat younger than the aforementioned trio. He arrived in Hungary in 1919, and he was vice consul in Vienna between 1921 and 1925. Therefore, he also gained a thorough first-hand knowledge of the various

peoples populating the former Habsburg lands. His books on the region's history starting with 1926 made him perhaps the number one expert on Hungary, and his views can be said to have been less biased than those of Steed and Seton-Watson.

Both Seton-Watson and Macartney authored books on the question of Hungarian treaty revision. Although neither thought applying changes in the border was beyond the possibility, when it came to "practical revision they held contrasting opinions" (130). Seton-Watson and Steed believed that political and economic cooperation among the Danubian countries was the first step before attempting to revise any of the borders as stated in the peace treaties, while Macartney's argument rested on the principle of ethnic-based frontiers first, collaboration second. But irrespective of their stance on the competing agendas of these countries, they were all firmly resistant to any of the dynamic Hungarian propaganda in the 1930s.

Beretzky also shows the four Britons' views regarding Germany, the successor states, and British policy after Hitler's rise to power and becoming more belligerent from 1936 on. There were noticeable changes. Although Steed remained steadfast in his refusal to consider any territorial corrections, Seton-Watson spoke more critically about the minority question in the member countries of the Little Entente. Toynbee, for his part, started to see ever more critically the postwar settlement, with especially low scores given to Czechoslovakia – the darling of Steed and Seton-Watson. What they all agreed on was the shortsighted policy of Great Britain vis-à-vis Germany. Macartney came out with his seminal book on Hungary in 1937 (*Hungary and Her Successors*), in which work he argued for an alteration of the borderlines as drawn in the Treaty of Trianon, but was against any future Magyarisation, and clearly saw that Transylvania could never again become part of Hungary, but should be a separate sovereign unit between Romania and Hungary. Therefore, it is easy to see that the perennial nationality problem did not offer itself for any easy solutions among either the politicians or the academics.

The events of the late 1930s in quick succession – the Anschluss, the Munich Pact, the First Vienna Award, the occupation and dissipation of Czechoslovakia – paved the way for another world war. But due to their often opposing views as to the solution of the problems in the Central European region, Seton-Watson and Macartney fell out for good with each other, with Steed seconding Seton-Watson's decision. The four historians argued for their respective insights strictly on the planes of academic debate – typically in the form of memoranda –, and three of them were employed by the government during the war. (Macartney, for instance, made as many as 186 broadcasts to Hungarians in fluent Hungarian on the airwaves of the BBC.) Whatever ideas they may have put forward regarding the future borders of Hungary and the surrounding countries, the conclusion of the war with Soviet military presence and political motives made all such planning devoid of interest and possibility.

The closing short chapter deals with the four scholars' ideas on nationalism and related topics in the milieu of the Cold War, but since two of them were old and soon retired, and in addition the dynamic and logic of the East-West antagonism put nationalism on the back burner, this chapter is less relevant that the previous long one.

In her conclusion, Beretzky states that "Steed, Seton-Watson, Toynbee and Macartney all disdained intellectual restrictions and labels of any kind, while at the same time respecting academic or intellectual independence to the utmost" (266). Accordingly, they had their main interests: Seton-Watson favoured the Slovaks, Seed equally was biased toward the southern Slavs, Macartney focused mainly on Hungary, while Toynbee concentrated first on Turkey, Greece, and the Armenians, and only second on Central European questions. All four had their measure of disappointments. Both Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia turned out to be anything but model democracies (and after the Cold War ceased to be individual states and fell prey to nationalism), the Hellenic questions demonstrated that democratic values proved next to nonexistent in the path of fervent nationalism, while Hungary provided a constant unsolvable dilemma, and interestingly a mutual platform to all four authors in the sense that "they all were critical of interwar Hungary, and its Horthy regime" (269).

Beretzky's book remains an engaging read throughout. The author uses a vast amount of archival material in addition to a wide scope of secondary literature. But it is really her focus on the four men and their thinking that brings to light so far hidden patterns regarding British attitudes toward Central and Eastern Europe and the states found there. And perhaps even more importantly, the issues these men engaged with and provided possible solutions for are still relevant to the area and still simmer under the (not always even) seemingly peaceful surface.