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Racial Problems in Central Europe: R. W. Seton-Watson and the Czechs, Slovaks, and Magyars

Thanks to the initiative of Christopher Seton-Watson and the efforts of Professors Rychlik, Marzik and Bielik, students of Czech and Slovak history now have a collection of documents pertaining to R. W. Seton-Watson that both parallels and surpasses earlier collections on his relations with Yugoslavia and Romania from the previous two decades.[1]

Volume one of this project includes, in both English and Slovak, a fifty-page essay by Christopher Seton-Watson surveying the life of his father as it pertained to Czechoslovakia and its people. Thereafter follow 228 documents of various sorts, covering 539 pages. Volume two consists of a detailed listing of the documents, name and place indexes, a bibliography of Seton-Watson's main works pertaining to Czechs and Slovaks, and the brief itineraries of the twenty-two visits that he made to Central and Eastern Europe during the course of his life. Co-sponsored by the T. G. Masaryk Institute in Prague and the Matica slovenska in Martin, *R. W. Seton-Watson and His Relations with the Czechs and Slovaks* provides valuable insight into both Seton-Watson himself and into the history of Slovaks and Czechs during a number of key periods of their respective histories.

The documents range from brief letters of a few lines to memoranda as long as seventeen pages. The overwhelming majority (p. 170) are in English, with around fifty in German and just a handful in Czech and Slovak, languages of which Seton-Watson had only a passive knowledge and in which very few Czechs and Slovaks wrote to him. Chronologically considered, fifty-

three documents pertain to the pre-World War I period, thirty-one to the time of the First World War, ninety-seven to the time of the First Republic, thirty-seven to the period from the Munich Agreement through the Second World War, and eight to the period after World War II. Although a few of the documents have been published elsewhere,[2] the overwhelming majority appear for the first time in print. Most of them (more than 150) come from the R. W. Seton-Watson Papers at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies in London. In addition, the holdings of the Literary Archive of the Matica slovenska, the Slovak National Archive, the Archive of the Institute of the T. G. Masaryk Institute, and the Archive of the National Museum in Prague were sources of Seton-Watson's correspondence with Czech and Slovak political, cultural, and intellectual elites.

At least three basic issues permeate the documents as they run their course from the early twentieth century, when Seton-Watson first made his acquaintance with Czechs and Slovaks, to the aftermath of the Second World War. These are his concerns with the origin, health, and survival of the Czechoslovak Republic, with the Slovak question, both in Old Hungary and the new Czechoslovakia, and with the Hungarian question, both in terms of post-Trianon Hungarian revisionism and the situation of the Magyar minority in Slovakia.

Regarding the Czechoslovak Republic, the documents show Seton-Watson's early acquaintance with and high regard for Tomas Masaryk. Among the materials included are Seton-Watson's account of a meeting with him

in October 1915 in Rotterdam to sound out his views on the future of the Czech and Slovak lands, and, among other documents, a letter urging Masaryk to accept a lectureship at Kings College. After World War I, Seton-Watson helped found the Anglo-Czech Relief Fund and the Czech Society of Great Britain (note the use of the term “Czech” for what were understood as Czechoslovak or Czecho-Slovak organizations). During the interwar period, he made frequent visits to Czechoslovakia and remained closely attentive to its affairs. The documents give accounts of some of these visits, and contain as well the correspondence with friends and colleagues from which Seton-Watson received his information about the situation in Czechoslovakia. This correspondence is in fact one of the more extensive and interesting parts of the collection. The book also documents Seton-Watson’s avid work on Czechoslovakia’s behalf during and after the Sudeten crisis. The image of Czechoslovakia that Seton-Watson loved and supported was that associated with Masaryk and Benes, negative toward the Austro-Hungarian past, suspicious of Slovak nationalism, liberal, and steeped in an ardent admiration for Jan Hus and the Hussite tradition. In this respect, it is worth examining the two other issues that were prevalent in Seton-Watson’s concern with the Czech and Slovak lands, the Slovak and Magyar questions.

Seton-Watson’s involvement in the Slovak question runs from early visits to Hungary, which led to the publication of his well-known *Racial Problems in Hungary* in 1908,[3] to his efforts during the Second World War to reconcile Slovak exile politicians such as Milan Hodza with Benes. The documents in this collection are quite extensive with respect to Slovakia and the Slovaks, and include memoranda and correspondence connected with his two books on Slovakia published during the interwar period.[4] Both works were conscious efforts by Seton-Watson to contribute in a positive way to Czech and Slovak reconciliation and to improve the image of Czechoslovakia in the eyes of the West. The documents underscore that, from the earliest years of the First Republic through to the end of his life, Seton-Watson was upset on numerous occasions with Slovak nationalism, and irreconcilably after the events of autumn 1938. References in his correspondence to the autonomist Slovak regime as “damnable” and the government of the wartime republic as “spineless” underscore his extreme bitterness at the time.

Though loyally committed to Masaryk and Benes and the idea that Czechs and Slovaks constitute, at least politically, a single nation, Seton-Watson apportioned to the

Czechs some blame for the “Slovak problem.” As he wrote to his wife May from Kosice in 1923, “the whole problem seems to me to be very largely one of tact or lack of tact. With a little more of that valuable (but with them rare) quality, the Czechs would carry all before them: it would dissipate most of the grievances which exist and indeed might easily have prevented most of them from arising” (p. 374). In retrospect, this appears a vast underestimation of the intractability of the problem of Slovak-Czech relations, even though Seton-Watson clearly understood its complexity, as evidenced by his work *The New Slovakia* in 1923.[4]

The Magyar question is also worth considering. Seton-Watson was known, since the early twentieth century, for his staunch opposition to Hungarian pretensions with regard to Slovakia, either in the form of magyarization before 1918, or revisionism afterwards. The documents, however, show Seton-Watson’s position with regard to Hungary and the Hungarians as more nuanced than is sometimes understood. In an article in *The New Europe* during the time of the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, he implies his approval of the *Grosse Schuett (Zitny Ostrov)* region remaining in Hungarian possession, based on the ethnic principle. In 1928, he prepared a memorandum for President Masaryk that pointed to the lack of progress by Czechoslovakia in improving the situation of the Magyar minority. Seton-Watson wrote: “indeed, I am reluctantly driven to the conclusion that their position is actually deteriorating and that they have to-day a number of very serious grievances which require remedy” (p. 413). He then went on to discuss these grievances in twelve pages. Throughout the entire period of the First Republic, Seton-Watson was acutely aware of the benefits that would accrue to Czechoslovakia should she satisfy her Magyar minority, and the problems that might ensue if she did not.

One of the assets of this collection is that it brings together of a number of relatively longer documents (several pages in length) both by Seton-Watson and others, which pertain to Czechoslovakia during key periods of its history. We find, for example, a message that Seton-Watson wrote to American Slovaks in 1923, the texts of two of his BBC radio broadcasts on the Sudeten German and Slovak problems in June 1938, and two memoranda that he sent to British parliamentary representatives in 1938 in connection with the Sudeten crisis and the Munich Agreement. Among the documents written by others but found in Seton-Watson’s papers, we see a report by a Catholic priest on electoral chicaneries in pre-Trianon Hungary, the Slovak Peoples Party’s

Zilina Memorandum of 1923, Jan Masaryk's commentary on Hitler's Godesberg Memorandum of September 1938, and a memo by Benes on Czechoslovakia's aims in 1941.

The above is just a sampling of the treasures that can be found in this collection. From the documents, we learn that a Slovak delegation presented a copy of Seton-Watson's *Racial Problems in Hungary* to Theodore Roosevelt during the latter's visit to Budapest. We find colorful descriptions of the hero's welcome that Seton-Watson reluctantly enjoyed upon his visits to Slovakia in the 1920s. We see Slovak nationalist leader Andrej Hlinka, himself hyper-sensitive to the confusion of "Slovak" with "Czech," refer to the Norwegian Bjornson as "the great Swedish writer" in a newspaper article, and Jan Masaryk describe himself as "a lazy and somewhat superficial bloke by nature" in a 1943 letter to Seton-Watson.

It is hard to find much fault with such a thorough, interesting, and well-organized collection. In places, the editors could have pointed out factual errors in the texts. For example, on page 566, a report by Social Democratic editor and Lutheran minister Jan Caplovic refers to the Slovak People's Party assembly of 1938 at Piestany, and the burning of the Czechoslovak-German pact at an SPP rally in summer 1938. In fact, the event at Piestany, a party congress, took place in 1936, and it was the Czechoslovak-Soviet pact that was burned at the rally in 1938. It would also have been helpful if the introductory essay had provided more discussion of Seton-Watson's religious background and beliefs. This is especially desired given his strong interest in the religious dimensions of the Slovak question, and his close contacts with and even patronage of young Slovak Protestants. Finally, the book's title is somewhat misleading in terms of its scope. Only eight documents, and those of very little substance, are included to cover the period from the end of the Second World War to 1951. From these, one gets only the most basic indication of Seton-Watson's views regarding the destruction once again of an independent Czechoslovakia. This is a deficiency that the introductory essay could have supplemented with a greater discussion of Seton-Watson during this period.

One final asset of this collection is worth mentioning, particularly as it could serve useful to teachers of

courses on general European history. Document 195 is the English translation of the Nazi guidelines for press censorship in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Not only does it provide apt insight into the problem of censorship, but it serves as a rich source for classroom discussion. It is all the more useful in the classroom because the document is readily intelligible to the student with little background in Czech or Slovak history. It also points out quite clearly some issues, such as the censor's suspicion of and vigilance against ambiguity, that apply to quite a number of situations besides the Czech lands during World War II.

Professors Rychlik, Marzik and Bielik have indeed done a service to the profession with this excellent collection. Rare would be the scholar of twentieth century Czech or Slovak history who could not find, in at least a few of the documents, material for his research. Rarer still would be the person interested in Czech or Slovak history who would not find hours of pleasure reading from this collection.

Notes:

[1.] Hugh Seton-Watson, et al, eds., *R. W. Seton-Watson and the Yugoslavs: Correspondence 1906-1941*, 2 vols. (London, Zagreb: British Academy; University of Zagreb, Institute of Croatian History, 1976); and Cornelia Bodea and Hugh Seton-Watson, eds., *R. W. Seton-Watson si romanii: 1906-1920*, 2 vols. (Bucharest: Editura Stiintifica si Enciclopedica, 1988).

[2.] See, for example, Christopher Seton-Watson, ed., "R. W. Seton-Watson's Three Memoranda from 1935-1938," *Bohemia XXX*, 2 (1989), pp. 375-385.

[3.] R.W. Seton-Watson, *Racial Problems in Hungary* (London: A. Constable & Co., 1908).

[4.] R.W. Seton-Watson, *The New Slovakia* (Prague: F. Borovy, 1924) and *Slovakia Then and Now* (London, Prague: G. Allen & Unwin; Orbis, 1931).

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