ZUZANA POLÁČKOVÁ – PIETER VAN DUIN

The bewilderment of a Scottish historian: R. W. Seton-Watson and the Hungarian minority in Slovakia, 1918 – 1923

Among the handful of early-twentieth century Western analysts of Eastern European problems, the Scottish contemporary historian R.W. Seton-Watson was by no means the least important. His work "Racial Problems in Hungary" from 1908 was a remarkable attempt to analyse the historical evolution of the Slovak-Magyar (ethnic Hungarian) relationship and the contemporary realities of multinational Hungary, in which the non-Magyar nationalities were subjected to a relentless policy of Magyarisation and national oppression. During the First World War Seton-Watson exerted his influence in Britain to help the revolutionary Czecho-Slovak leadership to proclaim a Czecho-Slovak state after the defeat of the Central Powers. At the end of 1918 this state was founded, but a serious problem emerging at the outset was the presence of large German and Magyar minorities in its territory. In the Slovak part of the new state the Magyar minority made up some twenty percent of the population, and the question was what kind of policies the Czechoslovak government was going to implement with regard to the Hungarians and the promises of cultural autonomy. This also included social issues, in particular the question of land reform of which both Slovak and Magyar peasants should benefit. In 1923 Seton-Watson made his first visit to Slovakia after the War and the successful national revolution of 1918, visiting several locations in the country and presenting his findings in "The New Slovakia", published the following year. It is evident that Seton-Watson found it difficult to evaluate the new situation in a straigthforward or consistent way. He sympathised with the new Czechoslovak state, but he also expressed some criticism with regard to certain Czechoslovak or Slovak policies on the Magyar minority. It would seem that the complexity of Seton-Watson´s views can be seen as an example of the bewilderment of Western commentators when it comes to trying to understand the complexities and dilemmas involved in the national problems of Central and Eastern Europe.

Key words: R.W. Seton-Watson; Slovak-Magyar relationship; national oppression; minorities; Czecho-Slovak state; "Racial Problems in Hungary"; "The New Slovakia"

If the nationality and national-minority problematic in Central and Eastern Europe is one thing, the attempts of Western European historians to understand and conceptualise it is another. Among the handful of early-twentieth-century 'Western' analysts of 'Eastern' European questions the Scottish contemporary historian Robert William Seton-Watson (1879 – 1951), also known as *Scotus Viator* ('The Travelling Scot'), was perhaps the most important. His work *Racial Problems in Hungary* (1908) was a remarkable and successful attempt to examine the historical evolution of the Slovak-Magyar relationship and the contemporary realities

of multinational Hungary, a country in which the non-Magyar nationalities were subjected to a relentless policy of 'Magyarisation' and national oppression since at least the 1870s. During the First World War Seton-Watson exerted his influence in Britain to help the revolutionary Czech and Slovak leadership at home and abroad to proclaim a Czechoslovak State after the defeat of the Central Powers. At the end of 1918 this state was founded, but from the outset a serious problem in Slovakia was the presence and the position of a large Magyar minority (and in Bohemia-Moravia an even larger German minority). The Magyar population in Slovakia made up some twenty percent of a total population of three million in this part of the Czechoslovak Republic, and the question was what kind of policies the new government was pursuing or planning to pursue with regard to the ethnic Hungarians, and to what extent and in what way the promises of cultural autonomy laid down in new legislation would be put into practice. This embraced a whole spectrum of problematical issues, including the social question of land reform of which the Magyar peasants should presumably benefit as well but which overlapped with the national-political and ethnolinguistic question, making the empowerment of lower-class Magyars – who had been exploited by the Hungarian landlords as much as the Slovaks – a difficult proposition.

When Seton-Watson visited the 'new Slovakia' in May 1923, he spoke to several representatives of the Magyar minority and presented his findings in a book published the following year.[1] The importance of Seton-Watson's book lies in its attempt to come to terms with the new reality of the Magyar minority in Czechoslovak Slovakia, the world having been turned upside down after the national revolution in East Central Europe. It is evident that Seton-Watson found it difficult to evaluate the new situation in a consistent and balanced way; he hoped that Magyar oppression of the Slovaks would not be replaced with Slovak oppression of the Magyars and that minority legislation and enlightened policies would ensure this. Although he clearly sympathised with the Czechoslovak Republic and its mainly Czech leadership, he also made some critical comments on certain Czechoslovak policies and attitudes to the Magyar population. There was an element of contradiction, confusion, and even bewilderment in Seton-Watson's statements on the issue, whereby some Czechoslovak restrictive measures with regard to the Magyars were defended, especially in the political and cultural field, but others were questioned, especially those that seemed unfair, short-sighted or even counterproductive by playing into the hands of Hungarian anti-Czechoslovak propaganda. His views on the Slovak Magyars themselves were complex as well, presenting them as victims in some contexts but describing them as deserving of their fate in other contexts. The 'bewilderment' of Seton-Watson and the complexity and inner contradictions of his views can be seen as an example of the confusion of Western commentators when it comes to 'objectively' trying to understand East Central European realities with their multiethnic and political dilemmas. This endeavour to understand – and of course its consequences – is a significant aspect of the problematic itself.

It is instructive briefly to look at Seton-Watson's early experiences in Central Europe and Hungary – the years after 1905 when he discovered the painful truth of the Magyarisation policy in multinational Hungary. This discovery caused what seems to have been a conversion from one point of view to another, because his – for Liberals rather customary – pro-Hungarian

[1] R.W. Seton-Watson, *The New Slovakia* (Prague, 1924).

position was replaced with what the Magyarisers would begin to call an 'anti-Hungarian' attitude. Seton-Watson's change of view showed his ability to look in a new and more critical manner at the intricate situation in East Central Europe, a tendency he displayed again after the national revolution of 1918, when part of the formerly dominant Magyars became national minorities in the post-Habsburg succession states. When Seton-Watson, apparently for the first time, visited Vienna and the Habsburg Monarchy at the end of 1905, a period when Hungary experienced a political crisis over its relationship with Austria, he believed like many Liberals in the West that the Hungarians were unfairly treated by the dominant Austrians and the Vienna press, which expressed itself in bitter terms about them. The following year, 1906, he also visited Hungary and spoke to several intellectual representatives of what may be termed 'official Hungary', including Professor Louis Lang, rector of Budapest University. The Magyarisation policy as it affected the Slovaks and other non-Magyar nationalities was an important topic of these conversations, and Lang confided to Seton-Watson: 'We shall just keep on at it until there is not a Slovak left'.[2] In Košice Seton-Watson met another Hungarian professor, Sándor Esterházy, until recently Director of the Academy of Law in that city, who likewise admitted, though in more cautious terms, that the complete Magyarisation of the Slovaks and the other non-Magyar minorities was the aim of Hungarian policy. These encounters with rather chauvinist Magyar intellectuals and others who in a more legitimating way were talking about the threat of 'Pan-Slavism' and the inevitability and blessings of Hungarian assimilation policy, began to change Seton-Watson's mind in a more sceptical direction as far as Hungarian policies and multinational realities were concerned. He also found that his critical questions were not taken seriously or replied to in an evasive manner. Back in Vienna, Seton-Watson met the Austrian social democratic leader Karl Renner, who was critical of Hungarian policy and who introduced him to Anton Štefánek, a Slovak schoolmaster, journalist, and sociologist who was doing research in Vienna and gave him a lot of information about the Slovaks and their position in Hungary. Seton-Watson began to show an interest in the Slovaks and the other non-Magyar nationalities in Hungary and to see through the workings of Hungarian propaganda and the Hungarian official mind. He also began to understand that the Hungarians' statements were accompanied by efforts to give him incorrect information and hide the painful consequences of the Magyarisation policy from him. The Hungarians suggested that they were Liberals like the British Liberals, and indeed the party that was responsible for introducing the harsh Magyarisation policies after the *Ausgleich* of 1867 was called the Liberal Party. But for the Magyars 'Liberal' meant national-liberal, i.e. a political ideology and practice aimed at creating a unitary Magyar national state by assimilating the non-Magyars. In 1906 a group of British Liberal MP's visited Hungary and was told about the blessings of Hungarian policies, which resulted in the publication of an account of their visit echoing the official Hungarian point of view. British and Western European Liberals could be naive enough to believe the 'Liberal' Hungarian propaganda, which was effective enough to convince some of them that Hungary was defending Europe against the threat of Pan-Slavism and Russia.[3] But Seton-Watson's own articles published in British newspapers from 1905, and his books that appeared in the follow-

[2] Hugh and Christopher Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe: R.W. Seton-Watson and the last years of Austria-Hungary* (Seattle, 1981), p. 33.

[3] Ibid., pp. 28 – 29, 33 – 34, 40 – 41.

ing years, put an end to Hungary's Liberal reputation in Britain and made him an enemy in the eyes of the Magyarisers and official Hungary.[4]

In 1907 Seton-Watson went to visit Slovakia ('Upper Hungary') to see political, cultural, and social conditions there with his own eyes.[5] He visited some 'offical Hungarians' again, but also a number of Slovaks representing Slovak opposition movements and the national-cultural aspirations of the Slovak people. This visit provided him with a large amount of evidence on Slovak conditions, which he used for writing his famous book on Hungary, the Slovaks and the national question: *Racial Problems in Hungary* (1908). It is not without interest that after his arrival in Pressburg (Bratislava) he met two Scottish workers employed with the local cotton factory of the British company Coates, 'who warned him not to believe what the Magyars should tell him about the Slovaks.'[6] These Scottish workers had obviously become acquainted with the realities of Magyarisation and Hungarian oppression policies and may have been in contact with the Slovak social democrats and their Pressburg newspaper *Slovenské robotnícke noviny*, whose editor was one of those interviewed by Seton-Watson.[7] Seton-Watson began to feel that some of the Hungarian representatives he spoke to, 'assumed that I was only superficially informed by persons who deliberately aimed at making a fool of me.'[8] In other words, one individual 'official Hungarian' told him an incorrect and superficial story and then another one carried on with this game. At a later stage of his Slovak trip he noted again that 'Magyars try to keep back the truth from me, by making vague and general admissions, to save their central position and the most compromising facts.'[9] In other words, by vaguely admitting from time to time that some mistakes had been made, they tried to avoid discussing the essential injustice of the Magyarisation policy and the most unacceptable aspects of Hungarian repression, including detentions, censorship, etc. But Seton-Watson now began to form a clear idea of the real nature of Magyarisation, of the political oppression of non-Magyar opponents, and of the chauvinistic, propagandistic, and rather paranoid mind of the Hungarian dominant class. His knowledge of the Hungarian Slavs and Romanians increased and he gained an insight in the world of Slovak opposition politics, which comprised different political streams, some of which began to quarrel with each other, mainly over the issue of cultural and political 'progressivism' versus religious conservatism. This problem was to prove of crucial importance after the foundation of the Czechoslovak Republic, when pro-Czech Slovak progressivists and anti-'Czechoslovakist' (anti-centralist) Slovak Catholics soon disagreed about government policy in the field of religion and education as well as political-administrative organisation. Already in 1911 Seton-Watson received information from Anton Štefánek about tensions between Slovak Catholics and those (including Štefánek himself) that were regarded by the latter as unwholesome progressivists and even 'atheists'.[10] But as yet this problem was overshadowed by an-

4 John Lukács, *Budapest um 1900: Ungarn in Europa* (Berlin, 1990), p. 159.

5 Hugh and Christopher Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe*, pp. 43 – 52.

6 Ibid., p. 43.

7 See for the Slovak social democrats, Pieter C. van Duin, *Central European Crossroads: Social Democracy and National Revolution in Bratislava (Pressburg), 1867 – 1921* (Oxford and New York, 2009), esp. Chapters 3, 4.

8 Hugh and Christopher Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe*, p. 43.

9 Ibid., p. 49.

10 Ibid., p. 83.

other problem: the question of the Slovak-Magyar relationship and, after 1918, how this was to develop following the collapse of the Habsburg monarchy and multinational Hungary.

During the proceedings of the Paris Peace Conference in the spring of 1919, Seton-Watson noted that the most serious difficulty in the process of drawing the state frontier of the Czechoslovak Republic was devising 'a satisfactory line between the Slovaks and the Magyars'; there was no historical precedent for this and no historical frontier as in Bohemia and Moravia. He claimed that it was in the interest of the Republic 'to be saddled with as few, not as many, alien subjects as possible', and it was advisable therefore to 'pare down' certain sections of the new state frontier and so reduce 'the number of its German and Magyar subjects.'[11] But this did not really happen, and in Slovakia the new Republic was 'saddled' with more than 600,000 Magyars. In May 1919 Seton-Watson visited Slovakia exactly at the moment when Hungarian Bolshevik forces invaded East Slovakia, posing an old threat in a new ideological jacket.[12] They were eventually expelled by international pressure and the Czechoslovak Army, but there clearly had been sympathy for them among a part of the local Magyar population, which now constituted a national minority in Czechoslovakia. Seton-Watson only returned to Slovakia exactly four years later, in May 1923. This was the occasion for him to systematically explore the political, social, cultural, and psychological state of the 'new Slovakia', also the title of the book he wrote about his findings in the country including the situation of the Magyar minority, which is the subject of the rest of this paper. His last visit to Slovakia took place in 1928, when he wrote another 'memorandum' on the situation that again included the problems of the Hungarian minority; it sympathetically discussed their grievances and was sent to President Masaryk, who apparently did nothing with it.[13] Here we will discuss Seton-Watson's analysis of the position of the Hungarian minority in 1923, more than four years after its incorporation into the Czechoslovak Republic or rather its finding itself at the 'wrong,' northern side of the southern frontier of the new Slovakia. Seton-Watson's *The New Slovakia* also paid full attention to the problem of the growing tension between Czechs and Slovaks, which emerged among other things because the more experienced, educated, and secular Czechs – who came to Slovakia in large numbers because of the lack of professional people there – often displayed a tactless attitude to the more conservative and religious Slovaks. Like this new problem, the equally novel question of the Hungarian minority was discussed by Seton-Watson from different aspects that were all significant in the new situation. However, it was difficult for the author to produce a consistent or balanced picture of the complex and sensitive problematic and it was probably inevitable that he was entangled in a web of contradictory observations and a real measure of bewilderment and confusion.

The first important thing that Seton-Watson noted in his analysis of the position of the Magyar minority in Slovakia was that the Czechoslovak Language Law of February 1920, which served as an appendage to the Czechoslovak Constitution, went considerably farther in respect of linguistic rights for the national minorities than the minimum that had been demanded by the Peace Conference from the new Central and Eastern European 'allied states' (Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Greater Romania). Any minority exceeding 20% of the population in a given

[11] Ibid., pp. 355 – 356.
[12] Ibid., pp. 370 – 371.
[13] Ibid., p. 420.

district 'had the right to communicate in its mother tongue with the authorities … and to receive both written and verbal replies in the same tongue, and again, to have its own language as instrument of instruction in the schools, and finally to use its own language in the courts.'[14] But the fundamental question to be considered was how far these rights assured 'full liberty' to the Magyar minority, that is 'how far they are actually carried into practice.' In general terms Seton-Watson considered the situation in Slovakia to be reassuring, because in comparison with the situation in old Hungary, where the Slovaks had practically no language rights at all, the Magyars enjoyed a satisfactory position from an overall political and cultural point of view. They were represented in the Czechoslovak Parliament with their own political parties 'according to their numerical strength', and were also represented 'on an equal footing in all local bodies'. They further possessed 'schools of every category, with teachers of their own nationality'; their language was admitted 'in the courts, in administrative correspondence, in public notices and signboards'; and 'many Magyars have been left undisturbed in official positions of different kinds – notably in such important posts as that of public notary.'[15] To some extent the latter contention was questionable – apart from these Magyar notaries in Magyar-speaking areas – because especially in 1919, large numbers of Magyar railway and postal officials and other government employees had been dismissed from their jobs for political or 'ethno-economic' reasons (labour substitution benefiting the newly dominant nationality).[16] But Seton-Watson was not entirely ignorant of the measures taken against former Hungarian government officials and employees, as will be shown below.

Seton-Watson sharply observed that 'no matter what concessions the new Republic might make to its Magyar citizens, these could not compensate for the tremendous shock to which they have been subjected' as a result of the national revolution. The rude awakening of the Magyar nation from its 'nationalistic megalomania' meant that it had 'not yet regained its mental balance', even after more than four years. The Magyars in southern Slovakia who were now a national minority had been 'occupying for centuries a dominant position, doubly entrenched by social and racial privilege' – here Seton-Watson was not thinking of the Magyar peasants and workers, although they had been entrenched by 'racial privilege' too – and then were placed 'at one blow … at the mercy of their former vassals.' Under these circumstances it was 'the duty of both Slovaks and Czechs to show a maximum of forbearance to the defeated', which is what, 'on the whole', the new Republic really did in Seton-Watson's eyes. On the other hand, the Slovak Magyars themselves were beginning to assume a more realistic attitude to the new state-political situation, although there were still Irredentist die-hards among them, but these he believed were no longer representative of the Magyar majority. Of course, this did not mean that the Magyars had no grievances. On the contrary, there were 'quite a number' and Seton-Watson had made a whole 'catalogue' of them. In comparison with the other succession states, however, the nature of the grievances of the Magyars in Czechoslovakia was proof of 'how favourably' their situation was and how willing the Czechoslovak Republic to meet them. But these reassuring words did not mean at all that the Slovak Magyars were contented, and Seton-Watson actually contradicted his own words in what followed. While the Magyar representatives that Seton-Watson spoke to admitted that the language rights accorded by the

[14] Seton-Watson, *The New Slovakia*, pp. 99 – 100.
[15] Ibid., pp. 100 – 101.
[16] See Van Duin, *Central European Crossroads*, especially Chapters 8, 9.

Law of 1920 'would be adequate, if put fully into practice', they insisted that the Law was 'frequently infringed'. Seton-Watson noted, clearly again trying to sound reassuring, that there was at least a legal basis for these rights and a standard towards which 'enlightened opinion in the Republic' could work. But in a first sceptical observation, he added that international opinion and League of Nations interference might have to play a part as well in ensuring the practical implementation of minority language rights. 'In a Europe restored to sanity the rights of a Magyar (or any other) minority would not be a matter of indifference', he wrote, resorting to what looked like a form of wishful thinking in addition to his cautious criticism.[17]

There were Magyar grievances with regard to certain aspects of the political process and the system of proportional representation, but more serious were 'complaints with regard to personal freedom.' In 1919 large numbers of Magyars – mostly government employees – had been interned in an arbitrary way in the context of the national revolution, Magyar resistance and sabotage, various strike movements in Slovakia, and then the Hungarian Bolshevist invasion.[18] Seton-Watson noted that these people were not only 'detained for lengthy periods without trial, but eventually released without apology or compensation.' Even if some of these measures could be explained by the extraordinary circumstances of the moment, this could not justify 'the failure to compensate for unjust detention.' But Seton-Watson had more critical notes to make. On the eve of the parliamentary elections in 1920 fresh internments had been ordered of some Magyar political figures participating in them, which was explained by the Magyars – 'and no other explanation is forthcoming' – as 'an attempt to paralyse their whole electoral campaign.' Seton-Watson's attention was also drawn to some incidents whereby people had been killed in Bratislava, and especially to the fact that the culprits had not been properly punished.[19] He did not want to express an opinion, but merely quoted these stories 'as the type of story which is circulated abroad regarding the treatment of the Magyars in Slovakia' (including by Englishmen who sympathised with the Hungarians). But the least he wished to say was that the 'authorities at Bratislava would be well advised, if they instituted a close enquiry into these and similar allegations, and prevented their recurrence by specially stringent instructions to their subordinates.' In other words, there had been some terrible incidents, and even three or four years later it was still necessary to urge the Czechoslovak authorities to look into them. Seton-Watson also noted that, even if the enemies of Czechoslovakia tried to discredit the Czech and Slovak legionaries who had fought so hard for the independent Republic, 'it remains true that here and there they seem to be allowed a privileged position in the eyes of the law.' There were several examples of this and he chose to mention one of them as being particularly painful – the demolition of the statue of Maria Theresa in Bratislava by Czech legionaries. That the legionaries with their militant anti-Habsburg ideology were above the law was indeed 'the impression created abroad by the complete immunity with which they were allowed' to do this. Whatever the excuses or explanations for this act, including the attempt of the last Habsburg emperor Charles to re-establish himself in Budapest after the suppression of the Hungarian Bolshevist regime, 'it was an act of vandalism which reflects discredit upon

[17] Seton-Watson, *The New Slovakia*, pp. 101 – 104.

[18] See Van Duin, *Central European Crossroads*, Chapters 7 – 9.

[19] Ibid., Chapter 7 for the demonstrators that were shot dead or wounded by Czech legionaries during a mass meeting in February 1919 in the final stages of a general strike in Bratislava, an incident that is not explicitly mentioned by Seton-Watson, who mentions some other, less dramatic incidents (p. 105).

its authors, and the failure to punish it inevitably aroused doubts as to the impartiality of the authorities, as between Magyars and Czechs or Slovaks.'[20]

Quite another question was that of the schools and education and of the language rights of the Magyars in this field. Seton-Watson described the situation as 'far from intolerable, though susceptible of certain improvements.' He noted that according to the latest census figures there were 749 Magyar and 11 mixed elementary schools in Slovakia with 94,084 Magyar children and 1,308 teachers. There were also 18 Magyar 'Bürgerschulen', with 132 teachers, and 5 purely Magyar middle schools and 9 others with Magyar parallel classes, with 139 Magyar teachers. Reforms demanded by Magyars that Seton-Watson spoke to, and which he defended himself, were the opening of some Magyar technical and agricultural schools, of a few additional Magyar Grammar Schools, especially in East Slovakia, and of Magyar elementary schools in certain purely Magyar villages to the south of Košice. Seton-Watson had received a list from his Magyar contacts of 32 'pure' Magyar communes without elementary schools of their own. He could not refrain from exclaiming, 'how happy the Slovaks would have been ten years ago, if there had only been ten Slovak villages where Slovak was taught!' He also concluded that a certain number of these 32 communes 'were in reality definitely Slovak villages, where a systematic campaign of Magyarisation had been conducted for some decades past.' The result was that, 'while the older inhabitants as a rule still spoke Slovak only, the middle-aged were bilingual, while the younger generation were growing up to prefer Magyar to their mother tongue.' Here Seton-Watson stumbled upon an instructive example of the tragedy of East Central European language policy, and his conclusion was that in cases like this the Czechoslovak authorities were 'absolutely justified in replacing Magyar by Slovak as the language of instruction …' In other words, here the Slovaks had the right, even the duty, to turn the clock back (or forward) and proceed with their revolutionary programme of 're-Slovakising' those that had been Magyarised or semi-Magyarised in the recent past. But there were also some 20 genuinely Magyar villages on the list of 32 which still lacked their schools with their own language, 'and it is to be hoped that this will be given to them.' Seton-Watson also backed the demand for a training college for Magyar teachers so as to ensure a sufficient supply of them in the future. Perhaps the most sensitive was the university question. In 1919 the Czechoslovak 'Komenský University' had been opened in Bratislava, and the Magyar-language education of the old Hungarian Elisabeth University had been abolished. The Magyars were now without the opportunity to enjoy higher education in their own language and Seton-Watson felt that this situation was not only unjust, but that it was not in the interest of the new Republic itself 'that a new [Magyar] generation should grow up with a well-grounded sense of grievance, rendered all the keener and the more dangerous by an imperfect education.' Seton-Watson apparently believed that Magyar-language higher education could produce a class of intelligent and reasonable Magyar citizens of Czechoslovakia who would accept the new state-political situation, or at least Czechoslovak democracy as the arena to voice their grievances. But he also realised that 'a majority of intellectuals' among the Slovak Magyars were 'genuinely Irredentist in sentiment', which obviously made the creation of a loyal Magyar citizenry in democratic Czechoslovakia very difficult and which revealed some of the contradictions – or perhaps insoluble dilemmas – of his own political analysis. 'It ought to be possible to provide

[20] Seton-Watson, *The New Slovakia*, pp. 104 – 107.

special Magyar courses and chairs at Bratislava University', he wrote, but in this respect he was to be disappointed.[21]

On another sensitive issue, that of Magyar cultural life and Magyar cultural societies, Seton-Watson proved less understanding of Magyar demands. It was precisely in this field that the old policy of Magyarisation of the Slovaks had been the most aggressive and intolerable. Nonetheless the foundation of a reformed Magyar Cultural League 'ought to be encouraged rather than prevented', he wrote, no doubt thinking of its function as a channel of expression for Magyar cultural energy and frustration, on condition that its aims were revised in accordance with the new cultural and political realities. The Magyar complaint that only one Magyar theatrical society had been sanctioned by the government instead of two, as was demanded, was dismissed by Seton-Watson. Such a complaint 'inevitably leaves me cold, when I remember the relentless veto imposed in pre-war days upon every Slovak cultural institution, even down to the humblest singing club in a remote village.' The Magyars should have their theatrical season, 'but it is to be hoped that they sometimes remember their own utterly uncompromising attitude to Slovak drama, music, art or literature, when power was still in their hands.' Here Seton-Watson clearly expressed his own emotions and also found an opportunity to tell the Magyars of Slovakia to practise a bit of critical and historical self-reflection and express a bit of *mea culpa*. A related question was that of censorship. For Seton-Watson this was a difficult one, because it was rather complex and involved a sense of responsibility on the part of all groups concerned, including the Slovak autonomists (opponents of Czechoslovak centralism), who had been the victim of Czech-imposed censorship policies just like the Magyars. He admitted that the Magyars had reason to complain of the sometimes arbitrary censorship of their newspapers, but so did the opposition press of the Slovak autonomists, whose treatment was 'open to very grave criticism, even though its tone be demagogic and often libellous.' In 1922 the offices of the autonomist newspaper *Slovák* had been the victim of 'disgraceful reprisals', and the fact that the offenders – apparently spontaneously acting violent pro-government individuals – had never been brought to justice, 'argues a degree of remissness on the part of the authorities in Bratislava, which provides the Autonomists with a real grievance.' The same could be said of Magyar victims of unjustified Czechoslovak censorship of a destructive kind. Regarding both groups of 'anti-Czech' critics it could therefore be argued that when they claimed that 'there are two different measures for the press of the Republic – one in the historic lands [Bohemia-Moravia], and one in Slovakia – they are but stating the simple truth.' This was a rather harsh criticism of Czechoslovak censorship policy, which acted more aggressively outside Bohemia, but it seems that Seton-Watson continued to believe that the Czechs were a necessary and mainly civilising force in Slovakia.[22]

He then shifted his attention to a particularly nasty problem haunting Slovakia in the 1920s, the question of the so-called 'Magyarones', i.e. a type of half-Magyarised Slovak with an allegedly Magyar outlook and mentality and who therefore tended to obstruct government policy and unified Czechoslovak statehood. The problem was that the political aim of the more extreme Slovak autonomists – a maximum degree of political and cultural self-government for Slovakia – was supported by many Magyars, who calculated that its attainment was a stepping

[21] Ibid., pp. 107 – 108, 110.
[22] Ibid., pp. 108 – 109.

stone towards reintegration of Slovakia into Hungary. This did not mean that the Slovak autonomists of the Slovak People's Party of Andrej Hlinka wanted such a reintegration, but it meant that there was a certain degree of overlapping of Slovak autonomist politics and Magyar Irredentist politics, including the presence of figures that seemed involved in anti-Czechoslovak intrigues. The Czech and Slovak opponents of Slovak autonomism tended to use the dismissive term 'Magyarones' to denounce and delegitimate the autonomists, whom they accused of having a pro-Magyar mentality and a pro-Hungarian political agenda. But Seton-Watson rejected the notion that because Slovak autonomy was supported by the Magyars, too, it should be rejected by the Czechs and Slovaks: 'those who advocate a wide devolution of powers to Slovakia cannot be expected to abandon what they regard as a sound and necessary programme, simply because there are others who hope to take advantage of it.' Nevertheless, there was such a thing as the 'Magyarone outlook', which was 'a virus which it will take many years to eject from the Slovak system.' Apparently he believed this was a problem of old Hungarian and 'Magyar' habits, conservative and anti-Czech mentality, and of course a 'Hungarian past', quite aside from current political strivings. But meanwhile the 'bad habit' of many Czechs and pro-Czech Slovaks to indiscriminately apply the label 'Magyarone' to their autonomist political rivals was doing 'infinite harm'. According to Seton-Watson it gave a personal and accusatory tone to the political debate and led to 'much undignified abuse on both sides', the Czechoslovak centralists accusing the autonomists of being pro-Magyar traitors, and the Slovak autonomists accusing the Czechs of being the new oppressors of Slovakia and their Slovak allies their henchmen. Seton-Watson tried to quiet the situation by suggesting that there were 'very few persons in Slovakia today, who have nothing in their past which could be construed as "Magyarone": and nothing is more difficult than to frame a fair qualifying test of Slovak patriotism.' But although he pleaded 'charity' in judging any individual, public opinion was also entitled to demand that 'those who were apparently oblivious of their Slovak feelings till a few short years ago, shall not claim to be virtually the sole judges of what is Slovak patriotism' now, or impudently denounce their opponents as having no right to call themselves 'Slovak'. In Hlinka's party, indeed, there were men who played a major role in old Hungary but now presented themselves as impeccable Slovaks. Seton-Watson considered it 'preposterous' that the until recently pro-Magyar Vojtech Tuka – the most typical 'Magyarone' imaginable – had been selected by the Slovak People's Party to draft an autonomist constitution for Slovakia. At the same time, he condemned those 'centralist officials or journalists' who denounced the party's leader Hlinka (who had really suffered under the old regime) as a Magyarone.[23]

The 'Magyar problem' thus had wider ramifications than just the presence of 600,000 Magyars in southern Slovakia. Seton-Watson believed that the influence of the Irredentist Magyars would gradually decrease. But a stabilisation of the new situation could also be actively encouraged by clever government policies, for example by paying attention to the needs of the Magyar lower classes and the peasantry, the latter having to be a special priority. 'It ought to be easy to win over the mass of the Magyar peasantry to the Republic by a sane policy of linguistic freedom in school and administration on the one hand, and by the grant of land on the other.' In this connection Seton-Watson was also aware of another potential Czechoslovak mistake: the temptation to settle Czechs or Slovaks in the Magyar regions. 'No surer means of alienating

[23] Ibid., pp. 109 – 111.

the Magyar peasantry could be devised than the plausible, but shortsighted, design of planting Czech and Slovak colonists along the frontier, to serve in the long run as instruments of Slavisation.' Such a policy had been tried by the Magyars in Transylvania and other parts of pre-war Hungary, by the Prussians in pre-war Poland, and 'is unhappily being attempted to-day by the Poles themselves in Eastern Galicia.' In all cases the policy failed and proved a political folly. As far as the Magyar peasants in Slovakia were concerned, no better 'means of conciliation' could be found than to apply 'Land Reform impartially in the interests of all the various nationalities alike.' The way in which Seton-Watson phrased it, appears to indicate that by 1923 he had not yet seen such an impartial land reform policy being enacted, which is not surprising given that it was mainly former Czech legionaries who benefited from it by being given plots of land in southern Slovakia, while not only deserving Magyars but also Slovaks were more or less ignored. Perhaps Seton-Watson's observations on this issue were a form of implicit criticism of Czechoslovak (or Czech) policy, and it would seem that the government failed to exploit the full potential of winning the hearts and minds of Magyar peasants by neglecting to carry out a more comprehensive and impartial scheme of land reform. There were even people who feared that the government preferred to strike a deal with elements of the old Hungarian order, arguably a more simple way of trying to stabilise the Czechoslovak regime in the Magyar territory. This was precisely the complaint of progressive and liberal Magyars and political refugees from Hungary, who obviously resented the reactionary Horthy regime in Budapest and hoped that a future democratic government in Hungary would seek a rapprochement with Czechoslovakia (at least they said so). Seton-Watson had the impression that these democratic Magyars believed that the cautious policy of Czechoslovak foreign minister Edward Beneš towards Hungary was caused, not by Entente pressure, but by his secretly welcoming 'the survival of the immoral and discredited Horthy regime', in the apparent belief that a democratic Hungary would 'exercise great attraction upon Slovakia' (on the Magyars, and perhaps even on some Slovaks). Seton-Watson himself believed that this interpretation was incorrect, and that Beneš 'regards the democratisation of Hungary as the indispensable precondition to cordial relations' between the two countries. 'But it is easy to see how such a legend could arise, and no effort should be spared to dispel it.' The 'most effectual disproof' of the theory that Czechoslovakia was not interested in furthering democratic and social change in Hungary and among the Slovak Magyars, was 'a steady extension of the national rights of the Magyar minority and a removal of such lesser, but very important grievances' as he had encountered when travelling in southern Slovakia.[24]

It is safe to conclude that Seton-Watson was not entirely certain that the Czechoslovak government was willing to implement a policy with regard to the Magyar minority as he considered necessary. When making a comparison with the position of the Slovak minority in Hungary – calculated as at least 250,000 – which had no cultural or national rights at all and lived in a climate of fear, it was clear that the Magyars in Slovakia had not much to complain about. The improvement of the position of this Slovak minority was a major condition for better relations between Hungary and Czechoslovakia and would also react favourably upon the situation of the Magyars in Slovakia. But this did not change the need for making improvements in the minority rights of the Magyars now, because it would stabilise the internal

[24] Ibid., pp. 111 – 113.

condition of democratic Czechoslovakia and prove that its government could not be placed in the wrong. However, Seton-Watson's analysis contained too many contradictory elements and implicit or even explicit doubts about Czechoslovak policy on the Magyars for him to be complacent or easily satisfied. He tended to support Prague-directed policies and obviously believed that Czech leadership was necessary and inevitable in the given situation. But he was also aware of mistakes made by the government, even serious mistakes, and of an attitude of national-revolutionary arrogance. Many things remained to be done, not in the last place carrying out a policy of social and land reform benefiting the Magyar peasantry. One feels that there was an element of doubt and bewilderment in Seton-Watson's observations, and that he lived between hope and fear. He tried to make his evaluation of the situation as balanced and consistent and also as optimistic as he could, but he was threatened to be overwhelmed by a sense of hopelessness and confusion. Perhaps he believed in the democratic future of East Central Europe, the 'new Europe', but he was aware that the national problems of the region were very difficult to sort out. When going into the details of the interethnic realities of the region, and in particular the question of the Magyar minorities in the succession states, it might seem as if the history of national antagonism could not be overcome. If it was uncertain that even the issue of the Magyar minority in civilised and democratic Czechoslovakia could be resolved, or that rationality could triumph over prejudice and hatred, there was a danger that sheer bewilderment was going to take over.