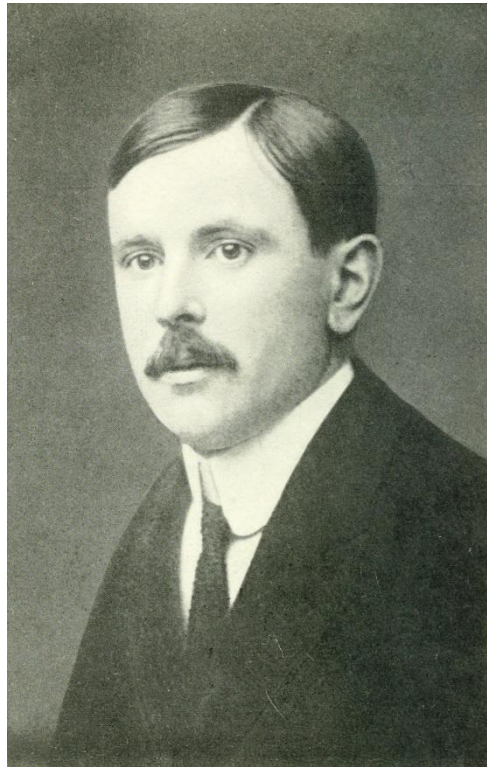


‘Scotus Viator’: R. W. Seton-Watson and the Making of Czechoslovakia



Robert William Seton-Watson (1920 or earlier)

© Unknown, from Campbell Stuart, *Secrets of Crewe House* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1920)

In addition to his work as a historian and writer, Robert William Seton-Watson (1879–1951) is best known for his political activism for the rights of Central and Eastern European small nations, and for his founding of the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES) in London. Seton-Watson made an invaluable contribution to the politics and indeed the western academic study of numerous South-eastern and Central European states; Hungary, Romania, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. He left over 3,000 items to New College Library, including books, press cuttings, articles, maps, reports, and memoranda concerning Central and Eastern European politics. The collection mostly features writings in English, but also in Czech, French, German, Hungarian, Slovakian, Romanian, and Italian. Seton-Watson’s interest in and knowledge of Central and South-eastern European history was recognized by the British Government as early as 1917, demonstrated by his appointment to the Intelligence Bureau of the War Cabinet, as well as to the Enemy Propaganda Department in 1918, where he played a vital role in disseminating insurrectional British propaganda to the Austro–Hungarian population. In 1916, Seton-Watson founded the weekly periodical *The New Europe*, and later the quarterly *Slavonic Review* (1922–present), which helped raise awareness about growing tensions in the region. Particularly during the First World War, Seton-Watson advocated replacing the Austro–Hungarian Empire, which he came to regard as an irreformable oppressive state, with independent democratic nations.

Some of the peoples most fiercely defended by Seton-Watson were the Czechs and Slovaks, indeed his role was fundamental, not only in founding the Republic of Czechoslovakia, but also in maintaining peaceful cooperation between Czechs and Slovaks from 1918 to 1938. During the First World War, he considerably assisted Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and the Czechoslovak liberation movement in the creation of the independent Czechoslovak state. While in 1938, Neville Chamberlain dismissed the Czechs and Slovaks as ‘people of whom we know

nothing’, Seton-Watson was a champion of oppressed Central and Eastern European nations.¹ From 1945 to 1949, he served as Oxford University’s first Chair of Czechoslovak Studies. Two of Seton-Watson’s children, Hugh and Christopher, were also New College alumni, and became eminent historians in their own right, specializing in nineteenth-century Russian history and nineteenth-century Italian history respectively.

Born in London in 1879 to Scottish parents, Seton-Watson saw the Union of England and Scotland as an ideal model for other countries wrestling with national issues, such as Czechoslovakia. His son, Christopher Seton-Watson, wrote that despite his English education, ‘he remained a Scot in spirit and outlook, and this goes far to explain his lasting interest in small nations’.² After being educated at Winchester College, Seton-Watson graduated with a first-class degree from New College in 1901 after studying modern history under Herbert Fisher. ‘As a tutor, Fisher was ideal,’ he wrote, ‘he took us seriously, put us on our mettle, laid his finger on essentials and asked of us impossible feats of reading which were so plausibly presented that it became a point of honour to attempt the impossible’.³ During his time here, he competed for and won the Stanhope Historical Essay on Emperor Maximilian I (having made an ‘abortive effort’ the year previous with an essay on Charles III of Spain).⁴ Of the college itself, Seton-Watson wrote that ‘New College, in the last decade of the century, had set the seal upon its transformation from a narrow, hidebound Wykehamical preserve into one of the largest and best-run Colleges, holding its own with Balliol in the “Schools”, and often Head of the River’.⁵

Having unsuccessfully tried for an All Souls Fellowship, Seton-Watson decided it had thus become ‘necessary to look for a career in some direction other than that of an Oxford Don’.⁶ However, following his father’s death, Seton-Watson inherited a sizeable amount of money, enough to spend a significant amount of time as a full-time graduate student in Berlin, Paris, and Vienna, and resumed his historical studies. His arrival in Vienna in 1905 spurred a lifetime interest in Central and South-eastern European history and politics, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. From 1906, Seton-Watson travelled widely within the Empire in what is today Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia, meeting various workers, landowners, politicians, lawyers, priests, and other leading nationals, listening to their grievances against Austro-Hungarian policies. His fluency in German allowed him to read the majority of Austro-Hungarian documents regarding the Slavic minorities within their empire. Seton-Watson’s regular correspondence with Slovak radicals Milan Hodža, Anton Stefanik, Emil Stodola, among others, influenced him to champion the oppressed Slovaks, Romanians, and Southern Slavs over Hungary. In May 1907, Seton-Watson was appointed the Spectator’s Austria-Hungary correspondent, during which time he frequently denounced the Magyar oppression of Slovak and other ethnic minorities within its shared empire. In particular, the Černová massacre in October 1907, in which Hungarian police fired into a crowd of Slovak peasants gathering for the consecration of the local Catholic church, sparked a series of polemical letters between Seton-Watson and Hungarian deputy Count Móric Esterházy. By this time Seton-Watson could read Hungarian, Serbian and Czech, though he preferred to communicate in German when speaking. In 1908 he published *Racial Problems in Hungary*, condemning the

¹ Audio recording, Neville Chamberlain, originally broadcast on the National Programme on 27 September 1938: <www.bbc.co.uk/archive/chamberlain-addresses-the-nation-on-his-negotiations-for-peace/zjrigwx> (Accessed: 12 December 2022).

² Christopher Seton-Watson, in Jan Rychlík, Thomas D. Marzik, and Miroslav Bielik (eds.), *R. W. Seton-Watson and His Relations with the Czechs and Slovaks: Documents, 1906–1951*, 2 vols. (Prague: Ústav T. G. Masaryka, 1995), 1, 21, New College Library, Oxford, NC/SET.

³ Hugh Seton-Watson and Christopher Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe: R. W. Seton-Watson and the Last Years of Austria-Hungary* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 13, New College Library, Oxford, NC/SET.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 12.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 14.

oppressive Magyar monarchy, which was met with critical acclaim in Britain, and he was subsequently awarded a DLitt from Oxford in 1910. In January 1911, the Československá jednota (Czechoslovak Union) wrote to Seton-Watson to congratulate him on his doctorate, and to express their hope that ‘you will not forget our suffering Slovaks in your future literary and journalistic work, and by use of your great influence support us in our struggle to free the culture—economical development of the Slovaks from Hungarian chauvinism’.⁷ Seton-Watson’s influence in Central and Eastern European affairs, and indeed his fame among the peoples whose causes he championed, was thus beginning to be recognised. After 1911, Seton-Watson continued travelling in the Czech districts of Austria and the Slovak districts of Hungary, and formed a particularly close friendship with a professor of philosophy at the Charles University in Prague, T. G. Masaryk, who would later become the first president of Czechoslovakia. The two had met briefly in 1907, but it was Masaryk’s defence of the Croat leaders in the Zagreb Treason and Friedjung Trials (1909–1910) that brought him into contact with Seton-Watson, who shared his concern for the fate of the Croats and other Southern Slavs. Seton-Watson recalled in the meeting as follows:

Between 1905 and 1914 I had spent considerable portions of each year in the Hapsburg Monarchy, making Vienna the centre of my travels and of constant travel in the Danubian and Balkan countries. I first met Professor Masaryk in 1910 . . . I liked him, but for some years I saw very little of him: there was a natural reserve about him which was never repellent, but did not make for speedy intimacy, especially with a man thirty years his junior . . . What gradually brought us together was the Southern Slav question. I was already behind-the-scenes of the Zagreb Treason Trial, and was thus able to test on the spot the most contentious points in his famous parliamentary defence of the Zagreb victims. At the Friedjung libel action I heard him give evidence on behalf of the Serbo–Croat Coalition, and my conversion to his views was completed by his political duel with the Foreign Minister Count Aehrenthal at the Austrian Delegation . . . When then, in July 1914, I undertook a journey to Central Europe in order to win support for a new quarterly ‘European Review’, which I proposed founding, I again turned naturally to him.⁸

On 17 September 1914, on the outbreak of war, Seton-Watson received an urgent letter from T. G. Masaryk in Rotterdam, informing him that ‘Bohemia (and Austria) is utterly quarantined—we read only what is allowed to be printed . . . I would like to hear what is going on, not only on the battlefields, but in the heads of those who will shape the future, perhaps the future map of Europe’. He went on to urge Seton-Watson to ‘telegraph me here whether you have got my letter and whether I can expect somebody from England here, *now*.’⁹ Henry Wickham Steed, foreign editor of the *Times* of London, instructed Seton-Watson to go to Holland, undercover as a temporary courier, to report on the evacuation of Belgian refugees who had fled after the German invasion of their country. After meeting Masaryk for a few days in Rotterdam, Seton-Watson took notes on his friend’s interpretation of Austria–Hungary’s internal situation and his views on how a settlement should be reached after the war; notes he shared with the Foreign Office’s War Department head and the French Foreign Minister, among others. After learning he was at risk of arrest in Austria–Hungary, Masaryk had moved to Geneva in exile, where he briefly met Seton-Watson again in February 1915. He was urged by Seton-Watson to come to London so that he could promote the cause of Czechoslovakia in the capital: ‘I have not been idle since my return to London, and I can safely say without fear of exaggeration that the Southern Slav cause, and the

⁷ Rychlík, R. *W. Seton-Watson*, I, 165.

⁸ R. W. Seton-Watson, *Masaryk in England* (Cambridge: University Press, 1943), pp. 34–5, New College Library, Oxford, SW1961.

⁹ Rychlík, R. *W. Seton-Watson*, I, 201.

Slavonic cause as a whole, is making very steady progress over here. So far as Bohemia is concerned, however, few people realize that there is a bohemian question, or at least that it has been raised by this war, and I feel very strongly that it is essential for you to come to London as soon as possible . . . The Enclosed letter will show you that your own compatriots are anxious for you to come: without you they are helpless here.¹⁰ During the summer of 1915, the pair launched what was to become University College London's School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES). Seton-Watson then invited Masaryk to accept a lectureship in Slavonic history and literature: 'I think I told you of my scheme for the foundation of a School of Slavonic Studies at London University . . . & I definitely suggested to Burrows that you should be invited to be the first lecturer—for next winter only of course as we hope and indeed know that you will have other & more important work to do later on. This would give a great impetus to the whole idea . . . as well as giving you & the Bohemian cause a special entrée in London.'¹¹ Masaryk accepted the offer at the end of September and returned to London for eighteen months. In July 1915, Seton-Watson delivered a lecture at King's College, in honour of the quincentenary of the death of Jan Hus, entitled 'The Future of Bohemia', in which he concluded: 'There will be room in the new Europe of which we dream for an independent Bohemia, industrious, progressive, and peaceful, a Bohemia which will have rescued its Slovak kinsmen from the intolerable yoke of the Magyar oligarchy, but which will carefully avoid the Magyar example and give the fullest freedom to its German minorities. The day has not yet arrived, but it will most assuredly come, if victory crowns the arms of the Allies'.¹²

Seton-Watson and Masaryk published *The New Europe* in October 1916, a weekly journal of political, economic, and social affairs in Central and Eastern Europe. The periodical regularly featured papers by the pair, along with contributions by other leading analysts from Central and Eastern Europe. As the journal inspired notions of insurrection and treason, the contributors wrote under pseudonyms to evade the Austro-Hungarian government. Upon his departure from London in 1917, Masaryk headed for the Russian front, hoping to create a Czech and Slovak army that would strengthen the Czechoslovak cause's case for Allied recognition. At the same time, the British Government employed Seton-Watson as the Intelligence Bureau's head for Central and Eastern Europe. He maintained that position until the end of the conflict, and remained an emissary of the British Foreign Office into the early years of the Czechoslovak Republic. However, for the stability of post-war Europe, the British government considered it necessary to salvage the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In January 1918, Lloyd George made a public statement of the British war aims, advocating 'genuine self-government on true democratic principles' for the nationalities of Austria-Hungary, but made no specific mention of the Czechoslovaks.¹³ In May 1918, however, after Seton-Watson attended the Congress of Oppressed Nationalities in Rome, the British Government warmed to Edvard Beneš and officially recognised the Czechoslovak Council 'as the present trustee of the future Czechoslovak Government'.¹⁴

On 28 October 1918, the Czechoslovak state was proclaimed in Prague, and the Austro-Hungarian and German armistices followed on 3 and 11 November. Subsequently, the Paris Peace Conference in Versailles, for which Steed had employed Seton-Watson as a temporary writer, provided him the opportunity to witness the Entente leaders redefining the borders of European nations. Seton-Watson had first-hand knowledge of the Central and Eastern European situation and a firm grasp the principles of democracy and self-determination that his friend, now the

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 216.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 241.

¹² R. W. Seton-Watson, *The Future of Bohemia: A Lecture Delivered at King's College, London, in Honour of the Quincentenary of John Hus* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1915), p. 31, New College Library, Oxford, SWP816.

¹³ David Lloyd George, *British War Aims: Statement by The Right Honourable David Lloyd George, January Fifth, Nineteen Hundred and Eighteen* (New York: George H. Doran Company, [1918]), p. 10.

¹⁴ 'Text of British Recognition', *The Bohemian Review: Official Organ of the Bohemian (Czech) National Alliance of America* 2 (9) (September 1918), 142.

Czechoslovak president, Masaryk intended to establish the new nation upon. Harold Nicolson, MP and member of the British delegation in Paris, recalled in his memoirs that he ‘never moved a yard without previous consultation with experts of the authority of Dr. Seton-Watson’.¹⁵

On 19 November, Masaryk arrived in London from the US, greeted with a guard of honour from the Grenadier Guards at London Euston Station. On 1 December he visited Seton-Watson at his London residence, before beginning his journey back to the new Czechoslovak Republic. Seton-Watson followed on 6 May 1919, where he was met by Masaryk’s son, Jan, and given use of private apartments in Hradčany. He then spent the next month travelling in Czechoslovakia, before returning home on 13 June. On 26 June, Seton-Watson was awarded an honorary doctorate of philosophy by Charles University in Prague. In the years following the First World War, Seton-Watson focused more on his academic pursuits and less on influencing government policy. *The New Europe* ceased publication in 1920 as interest in Central and Eastern European affairs waned, the journal was no longer profitable, and Seton-Watson had become ‘fed up with the role of a disinterested philanthropist in politics’.¹⁶ In 1922, Seton-Watson was appointed the first holder of the Masaryk Chair in Central European History the School of Slavonic Studies, and, together with Sir Bernard Pares, he founded the *Slavonic Review*, to which Masaryk contributed the first article entitled ‘The Slavs After the War’.



Seton-Watson and T. G. Masaryk (1928)

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Between 1918 and 1938, Seton-Watson became embroiled in grievances of Slovakia against the Czechs, and attempted to mediate between the Czechs and Slovaks, many of which were his

¹⁵ Harold Nicolson, *Peacemaking 1919* (London: Constable, 1933), p. 126, New College Library, Oxford, SW588.

¹⁶ Seton-Watson, *The Making*, p. 408.

friends, who were ‘busily engaged in the difficult task of national reconstruction’.¹⁷ In 1923, Seton-Watson returned to Slovakia, where he ‘met with an almost embarrassing welcome on all sides, was able to discuss matters with every persons of every category and shade of opinion, was inundated with the details of every conceivable grievance, public or private’.¹⁸ His findings culminated in his book *The New Slovakia* in 1924. In June 1925 and 1927 Seton-Watson embarked on extended tours in Yugoslavia and Romania, and on the second occasion stayed in the Hrad, having long discussions with Masaryk, Beneš, and Hodža after the Slovak People’s Party joined the coalition government in Prague and an administrative reform was approved, easing Slovak discontentment with the centralised government in Prague. In 1928, Seton-Watson lectured at the Charles University in Prague and in Brno, before seeing President Masaryk at Lány Castle, then embarking on an extended visit to Slovakia, hoping to ‘study political conditions and in particular to compare them with the conditions in 1923’.¹⁹ On 20 June, Seton-Watson returned home, where he spent the next six weeks composing a memorandum on ‘The Situation in Slovakia and the Magyar Minority’, in which he detailed the diminution of Slovak grievances since 1923, but admitted that the Magyar situation was deteriorating. He sent a copy of the Memorandum to President Masaryk, who assured him that ‘the Memo you sent me will have the needed effect I hope I’ll see to it’.²⁰ In May 1929, Seton-Watson departed on another extended tour of Yugoslavia, followed by a short visit to Transylvania, then meeting his wife May and sons Hugh and Christopher for a family holiday in Štrbské Pleso. However, within a few days, Seton-Watson was admitted to hospital in Bratislava with rheumatic fever, arriving at the train station to a large crowd, a testament to his popularity in the region. At President Masaryk’s personal expense, Seton-Watson was taken care of by a specialist and chief surgeon, while the rest of the family stayed at the Hotel Carlton. He received a string of visitors in hospital, including Alois Kolísek, Jozef Kállay, the Štefáneks, and the British vice-consul. Returning to Prague on 14 November having fully recovered, Seton-Watson showed a renewed interest in politics. However, the financial crisis of 1929 left Seton-Watson unable to return to Central and Eastern Europe for a number of years, though he kept in close correspondence with Jan Masaryk, Hodža, Kolísek, among others. He devoted even more time to his academic writings, such as a book of essays by prominent Slovaks entitled *Slovakia Then and Now* in 1931, followed by: *A History of the Roumanians* (1934), *Disraeli, Gladstone, and the Eastern Question* (1935), and *Britain in Europe, 1789–1914* (1937).

Hitler’s rise to power in 1933 and the growing German nationalist sentiment in Czechoslovakia distressed Seton-Watson greatly. In 1936, he had several meetings with Konrad Henlein, the leader of the extremist Sudeten German Party, President Beneš, who had succeeded Masaryk in 1935, now Prime Minister Hodža, and with the foreign minister Kamil Krofta, and by 1938 had concluded that the Sudetendeutsche Partei (SdP) ‘takes its marching orders from Hitler’.²¹ Upon Hitler’s invasion of Austria on 12 March 1938, Seton-Watson wrote to the Home Secretary, appealing for some public recognition of Czechoslovakia’s key strategic position, arguing that a war resulting from a German attack could not be localized. He received no such assurances. Instead, the British and French Governments increased their pressure on Beneš and Hodža to concede to the SdP’s demands. In his book *Britain and the Dictators* (1938), Seton-Watson added a brief ‘Austrian Epilogue’, dedicated to his sons ‘Hugh and Christopher and to their generation’, in which he condemned Britain’s policy of appeasement: ‘Once let the Czech fortress fall, and the tide of totalitarian state doctrine will flood across the Danubian and Balkan area: Britain’s negative policy, and her failure to give due encouragement to those democratic elements which are quite logically at one and the same time democratic, Francophil and Anglophil, will reap

¹⁷ R. W. Seton-Watson, *The New Slovakia* (Prague: F. Borový, 1924), p. 11, New College Library, Oxford, SW1796.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

¹⁹ Rychlík, R. W. *Seton-Watson*, I, 409.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 426.

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 486.

its fatal fruits’.²² In a copy presented to Christopher Seton-Watson he added in his own hand ‘And may your generation do better than mine!’²³ In June 1938, Seton-Watson made three broadcasts for the BBC in which he set out his analysis of the background to the crisis in which Czechoslovakia now found itself. On 2 July, Seton-Watson, May, and their son Hugh departed for Prague to attend the sixtieth anniversary of the Sokols. They stayed at the Hrad as the President’s guests, accompanied by the Steeds, dining with the Beneš’s and Jan Masaryk. According to May, Beneš was ‘in great form’ but looked ‘a good deal older’, as he gave a ‘complete exposé of the Central European situation’ and the ‘Hodža–Henlein negotiations’.²⁴ They then attended the Sokol festivities in the Stadion and the main square, before lunching with the Hodžas on 8 July: ‘The P.M. was looking tired. He has been engaged in negotiations with all these minorities for weeks past, and says the final tussle will be next week’ wrote May.²⁵ On 9 July, Seton-Watson travelled with May to Luhačovice to a Congress of the Československá jednota, where he made an ‘appeal to the whole nation to sink party differences in the face of danger to the whole state’ which was ‘received with a tremendous ovation . . . interrupted at every sentence by loud applause’.²⁶ In a letter to her son Christopher and daughter Mary, May recalled, in Bratislava on 11 July 1938, mounted Sokols were waiting to escort them into the town ‘with some hundreds peasants, boys and girls, dancing ahead of us all the way, waving their hats and kerchiefs and cheering, to the art gallery where your father laid a wreath on the steps of the Masaryk memorial’.²⁷ They were entertained by the Okániks, the Štefáneks, and the Stodolas. However, shortly after Seton-Watson’s return to Scotland in August, the international situation rapidly deteriorated. On 14 September, the news broke that Neville Chamberlain was flying the next day to meet Hitler at Berchtesgaden. Seton-Watson spent the following ten days desperately mobilizing support for Czechoslovakia, fearing the British government was seeking an agreement with Hitler at Czechoslovakia’s expense. In anticipation of Chamberlain’s acquiescence to Hitler’s demands for Sudeten German self-determination, Seton-Watson wrote a memorandum on ‘The Difficulties of a Plebiscite’. According to the Anglo-French Plan, presented to the Czechoslovak Government on 1 September, Sudeten German districts were to be ceded simply without a plebiscite. Beneš rejected the proposal the afternoon of 20 September, but gave in to the British and French ministers’ ultimatum early on 21 September. Once Chamberlain received Beneš’s reluctant acceptance of the Anglo-French proposal, he flew to Godesburg, where he encountered demands that went well beyond those at Berchtesgaden. On 26 September, Hitler demanded that the Sudetenland be ceded to Germany by 1 October. The following day, Chamberlain famously broadcast: ‘How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas masks here because of a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing. It seems still more impossible that a quarrel which has already been settled in principle should be the subject of war’. (On 6 October he would follow this up, in a speech to the House of Commons, with: ‘Therefore, I think the Government deserve the approval of this House for their conduct of affairs in this recent crisis which has saved Czechoslovakia from destruction and Europe from Armageddon’).²⁸

In almost hourly contact with Jan Masaryk, Seton-Watson kept abreast of these events, but his main task was to compose a memorandum to be circulated among members of Parliament. He sent it out on 26 September to all members of the House of Commons, in time for them to read it before parliament met on 28 September. In a copy held at New College Library, Seton-Watson’s warning reads as follows:

²² *ibid.*, pp. 442–3.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 43.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 44.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 45.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 46.

²⁷ *ibid.* T. G. Masaryk had passed away the previous year.

²⁸ Neville Chamberlain, *The Struggle for Peace* (London: Hutchinson, [1939]), pp. 275, 321.

It will thus be seen that the British Government in particular after subjecting the Czechoslovak Government to many weeks of pressure through the medium of the Runciman Mission (sometimes insisting on greater haste of concession, sometimes holding them back from the decision or from reference to Parliament) suddenly altogether abandoned the whole basis on which that Mission was working (namely, a German–Czech compromise within the framework of the Czechoslovak state) and presented Prague with a real ultimatum involving dismemberment in the event of acceptance and abandonment in the event of rejection. All this without consultation or warning and in defiance of the elements of democratic practise—with, in effect a time limit shorter than that accorded by Austria–Hungary and her automated Serbia in 1914. It is no exaggeration to describe this as the most formidable demand ever presented by British Government to a friendly nation: and the Prime Minister may be challenged to produce from the history of our foreign policy any document so humiliated and so contrary of the spirit of that country. There is indeed hardly any attempt to conceal the fact that it was dictated to the Prime Minister by the Fuhrer at Berchtesgaden.

Even this however was not held to be enough. The British and French Ministers in Prague received instructions to make an immediate *démarche* to the President Beneš *a propos* of the Czechoslovak reply. This *démarche* was made at 2 a.m. on the 21st of September and was under four heads.

1. Britain and France have a duty to prevent a new European war, if humanly possible and thus an invasion of Czechoslovakia.
2. They wish the Czechoslovak Government to realise that if it does not *unconditionally and at once* accept the Anglo French plan it will stand before the world is solely responsible for the ensuing war.
3. By refusing Czechoslovakia would also be guilty of destroying Anglo French solidarity, since, *in that event*, Britain will *under no circumstances march, even if France went to the aid of Czechoslovakia*.
4. If the refusal should provoke a war, France gives official notice that she will not fulfil her treaty obligations.

Both Ministers insisted upon immediate and unconditional compliance—in other words without any possibility of reference to Parliament or public opinion in any form whatsoever.

The form in which the second ultimatum was delivered, appears to have been even more abrupt and wounding in the original Note: and no better proof its crushing effect can be ground than the fact that General Faucher, the distinguished French soldier who had been lent to the Czechoslovak staff and who was present at the interview, at once declared to President Beneš that he was ashamed to be a Frenchman and desired to be accepted it as a Czechoslovak citizen. There are many Britons to-day who fully understand his feelings and share his humiliation.

It remains to be seen whether the Prime Minister will be able to justify before Parliament this abject capitulation to Herr Hitler and the undemocratic method of condemning the victim unheard and committing our own country in advance to fundamental changes in the map of Europe and the balance of world power.

But it is scarcely less important to discover who is responsible for the actual details of the plan forced upon the Czech—in view of the fact that it is literally incapable of execution and would breakdown even in the improbable event of an international body being up for its examination. No one, of any nationality, who

has first-hand acquaintance with the conditions in Czechoslovakia or with the historical background of the century-old German–Czech dispute, can fail to agree that it is almost equally objectionable from the political, economic, strategic and administrative point of view, and even racially open to grave objections. The adoption of the entirely arbitrary figure of 50 per cent German districts has no meaning save to produce chaos and open the door of the fortress to the Trojan horse. The new line would abandon the natural watersheds, cut across the lower reaches of the valleys, leave industrial districts in the air, severed from their natural customers. It will dislocate the whole economic life of the state, equally as regards mining and textiles. It will deprive the Czechs of their “Maginot Line” and leave them defenceless. It will even cut important railway connections, *e.g.*, between Prague and Brno and Slovakia—a proposal like cutting off London from Manchester and from Scotland . . .

No one would criticise the two Governments for going to great lengths in the exercise of pressure on *both parties* to the dispute, in the interest of the great aim of European peace. But in actual fact their pressure has been entirely one-sided and Mr Chamberlain went to Berchtesgaden but avoided going to Prague to hear the other side . . .

This is not the way to secure peace but merely prepares the way for fresh demands such as simultaneous cessions to Hungary and Poland and the complete partition of the Czechoslovak state

Why has the German campaign been concentrated against Czechoslovakia, where the German minority is so much better treated than the German minorities in Italy, Poland, Hungary, Romania and Jugoslavia?

1. Any good physical map shows Bohemia to be a strategic key of the highest importance—either as a defensive position against German expansion, or as a point of vantage from which Germany can make herself impregnable. Remove it, and Germany can safely concentrate her forces against the West, having wiped out an efficient army of 1 500 000 men with 2000 planes, having possessed herself of some of the largest munition works and steel and iron plants in Europe, and having cut off the Balkan states from their best supply of munitions. In any future conflict, therefore, Germany would be virtually immune from the dangers of blockade and also immune from the danger of being caught up in armament.
2. Czechoslovakia is the last stronghold of democratic government east of the Rhine. Her destruction is therefore desirable, the more so because it would be a severe blow to democratic forces striving, with reasonable prospects of success, to recover ground in Poland and in the Balkan peninsula.
3. Czechoslovakia and her President have been consistent supporters of the League of Nations and the principle on which it rests. Their downfall would be a further nail in its coffin, and a warning to all smaller nations.
4. Her abandonment would be a fatal blow to the prestige of the two Western Powers and would leave them to face their fate alone at no distant date.
5. Incidentally, it would endanger the future of Poland (despite her temporary arrangement with Berlin) and probably force the Little Entente and Balkan Entente into the German orbit.²⁹

Having been given a ticket to attend the House of Commons meeting on 28 September, Seton-Watson witnessed the announcement made by Chamberlain that he was invited to a meeting with

²⁹ R. W. Seton-Watson, [Joint Franco–British Note to Czechoslovakia] (London: Favil, 1938), New College Library, Oxford, SWP836.

Hitler in Munich the next day. In his later writings, Seton declaimed that he wished ‘never again to live through such five minutes of shame for my country or disillusionment at the miscarriage of the Parliamentary system’.³⁰

Czechoslovakia’s representatives were not present when Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and Italy negotiated the ‘cession to Germany of the Sudeten German territory’ of Czechoslovakia.³¹ The Munich Agreement—known in Czech as *Mnichovská zrada* or *Mnichovský diktát*, the Munich Betrayal or Munich Diktat—was signed on 30 September 1938. President Beneš resigned on 5 October, going into exile in London. Between this time and early 1938, Seton-Watson was actively involved in activities designed to awaken public opinion to the realities and consequences of the Munich settlement. On 2 March 1939, he published *Munich and the Dictators*, ‘to “this Beneš” who trusted the good faith of an ally and the good will of a friend’, which was even more scathing than its prequel.³² He accused the British Government of ‘escaping from the grim justice of war and saving our own skins by carving up the 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’.³³

On 14 March 1939, the remainder of the Czechoslovak state was split as Slovakia declared itself independent, essentially becoming a pro-Nazi puppet state. The next day Carpathian Ruthenia, an eastern region of Slovakia on the border of Hungary, Poland, and Romania, was annexed by Hungary. The following day, Czechoslovak President Emil Hácha met with Hitler in Berlin, who had already given the order for the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia. Following Hitler’s threat that Prague would be bombed if Czech troops refused to surrender, Hácha agreed to accept German occupation of the remainder of Bohemia and Moravia.



Adolf Hitler at Prague Castle (15 March 1939)

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³⁰ R. W. Seton-Watson, *Munich and the Dictators* (London: Methuen, 1939), p. 99, New College Library, Oxford, SW985.

³¹ Munich Pact September 29, 1938: <<https://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/munich1.asp>> (Accessed: 12 December 2022).

³² Seton-Watson, *Munich*, p. v.

³³ *ibid.*, p. 141.

On 15 March, German armies occupied Prague and the rest Bohemia and Moravia, establishing the German Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. The democratic republic of Czechoslovakia, as championed by T. G. Masaryk, was ended after just twenty-one years. Immediately after Konstantin von Neurath's appointment as Reichsprotektor, many German refugees, Jews, and Czech public figures were arrested. As Seton-Watson had predicted, Hitler boasted in a speech in the Reichstag that the Czech munitions 'confiscated and placed in safe keeping' included '1,582 aeroplanes, 501 anti-aircraft guns, 2,175 light and heavy guns, 469 tanks and 43,876 machine-guns . . . bridge-building equipment, aircraft detectors, searchlights, measuring instruments, motor-vehicles, and special motor-vehicles'.³⁴

After the outbreak of the Second World War, Seton-Watson once again held posts in Government service, at the Foreign Research and Press Service (1939–1940) and Political Intelligence Bureau of the Foreign Office (1940–1942). Both during and after the war, he stayed as up to date as he could with the situation in Czechoslovakia, though he was unable to publish any of his writings in wartime, even anonymously.³⁵ After the liberation of the country by Soviet forces, Seton-Watson maintained high hopes for Czechoslovakia, until the imposition of a one-party Communist dictatorship 1948. According to his sons, the news Seton-Watson received from Eastern Europe was 'uniformly distressing', particularly as many of those arrested by the Czechoslovak Communist regime were his friends.³⁶ In 1948, Jan Masaryk was found dead in the courtyard of the Foreign Ministry in Prague. Seton-Watson retired his professorship in Oxford in 1949, and the chair of Czechoslovak Studies ended with him. After devoting most of his life to the independence of countries now under Soviet control, Seton-Watson died on the Isle of Skye in 1951, three years after Edvard Beneš, who had died in September 1948, just seven months after the communist coup.

Seton-Watson's journalism, activism, encouragement of the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and his role in forming the idea of a new Czechoslovak Republic are now widely forgotten in Britain. However, in the Slovakian town of Ružomberok, there is a bronze bust of Seton-Watson along with a memorial plaque, upon which is inscribed his pseudonym 'Scotus Viator', an affectionate nickname given to Seton-Watson by the Czechs and Slovaks, meaning 'the Travelling Scot'.

Dear friend, you belong today not only to yourself, your family, and your people, but also to us. In our history, and in our schools, yes even also on our street signs your name will be immortalised.³⁷

Anton Štefánek to R. W. Seton-Watson (1937)



Bust of Seton-Watson in Ružomberok
© Peter Zelizňák

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³⁴ 'Herr Hitler's Speech to the Reichstag', *The Bulletin of International News* 16 (9) (6 May 1939), 6–13, at p. 8.

³⁵ Seton-Watson, *The Making*, p. 408.

³⁶ Rychlík, *R. W. Seton-Watson*, I, 433.

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 9.