

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Andras D. Ban, ed.** *Pax Britannica: Wartime Foreign Office Documents Regarding Plans for a Postbellum East Central Europe*. Boulder and Highland Lakes: Columbia University Press, 1997. xii + 253 pp. \$42.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-88033-372-6.

**Reviewed by** Milan Hauner (University of Wisconsin-Madison)

**Published on** HABSBURG (November, 1997)

## British Blueprints of 1942 for Reconstructing Eastern Europe

Any historian of World War II who is familiar with the FO371/35261 file in the Public Record Office of London will recognize these memoranda on the postwar reconstruction of eastern Europe. Eight of such memoranda appear in this collection, together with the minutes (commentaries) by Foreign Office staff, spanning the period between September 1942 and February 1943.

Let us first mention the authors of the memoranda. The memos are the outcome of a collective cross-fertilization of several dozen mostly anonymous minds, loosely associated with a semi-official body, the Foreign Research and Press Service (FRPS). A forerunner of today's think tanks, this was an informal research unit put together by Professor Arnold Toynbee under the auspices of the renowned Royal Institute of International Affairs (RIIA), which still exists today at the same address on St. James's Square (Chatham House). The other ministry which collaborated with the FRPS was the new Ministry of Information in charge of war propaganda. To draw in more academics and to escape the Blitz, the researchers were moved to Balliol College, Oxford. Britain's leading specialists on east central and southeast Europe: R.W. Seton-Watson, an early advocate of population transfers in Europe; his chief rival C.A. Macartney, the best expert on Hungary the British had; David Mitrany on Romania; and R.G.D. Laffen on Yugoslavia all joined in this unique effort of letting out wishful academic thinking to be scrutinized by the various FO echelons. The FRPS stayed in Oxford until April 1943, when it was moved back to London to merge with the Foreign Office's PID (Political In-

telligence Department). Toynbee headed the FRPS until 1946 when it was dissolved.

The memoranda with their minutes (commentaries) from the FO staff were selected by Andras Ban, an historian at Budapest University, who first produced the Hungarian version in 1996. Both the Hungarian and American editions were supervised by Hungarian experts in the field, professors Bela Kiraly, John Lukacs, and especially Ignac Romsics, whose own recent, related work[1] preceded Ban's book.

That the idea to produce wartime blueprints on reconstructing eastern Europe comes from Hungarian historians is not at all surprising. Hungary is the country figuring prominently in the memoranda because of a kind of British double standard: there were British experts who would grant Hungary a much larger degree of independence in German-occupied Europe and therefore would hope that she could withstand German pressure. This speculation was to a certain degree justified by Hungary's pretense of maneuvering skillfully between the great powers, at least until prime minister Count Teleki committed suicide on the eve of the German aggression of Yugoslavia in April 1941. Hungary was also the country that was to gain most by any territorial reconstruction in east central Europe. Having lost more than two-thirds of her territory after World War I, and sixty percent in population of which at least three million were Magyars, after such brutal treatment Hungary could presumably only increase its size and population, regardless of who

was going to win the next round.

The first and most significant memorandum in the collection is entitled "Confederations in Eastern Europe" and was completed in August 1942. It is time to be reminded that today's process of European integration, so far confined to western Europe, was widely and minutely discussed among east European exiles during World War II under the fascinating heading of "confederation." Very few exile politicians realized the legal implications when they entered into bilateral discussions on this topic. In the extensive Czechoslovak-Polish discussions on the future confederation between the two countries, such fundamental issues as the future political system and the Teschen question were left out by mutual consent. The Czech Teschen (Trans-Olsza) district was occupied by Poland in October 1938 during the Sudeten crisis and no Polish politician was prepared to give it back to postwar Czechoslovakia. The FRPS blueprint was thus based on two unfinished models, the Czechoslovak-Polish and the Greek-Yugoslav confederation plans as agreed upon between the respective exile governments in January 1942.

There were, of course, other parallel plans for a central European (Danubian) confederation, such as the transparently restorative plan for a Danubian confederation put forward by Otto von Habsburg, or the "Eastern Switzerland" concept of Oscar Jaszi. In any case, for the Polish premier in exile, General Wladislaw Sikorski, one huge confederation encompassing all the countries between the Baltic and Adriatic seas would be enough, whereas for President Edward Benes, the head of the Czechoslovak exile government, two confederations, namely the Czechoslovak-Polish and Greek-Yugoslav, were preferable. According to the prevalent British view, the first confederation was to incorporate Hungary and perhaps Austria, the southern confederation also Romania and Bulgaria. Transylvania was recognized as the perennial bone of contention between Hungary and Romania at that time. However, the FRPS commentators were not unanimous as to which of the two confederations Transylvania should join, what kind of economic policies, autarkic or free market, and what political systems should be ordained for this uneven and divergent region.

To answer the structural defaults of the first paper, six additional ones were produced by the FRPS which are included in the collection in the following order: "Economic Possibilities in Eastern Europe with Reference to Political Structure" (February 14, 1943), "The Future of Austria" (February 26, 1943), "The Problem of Transyl-

vania" (February 21, 1942), "The Problem of Yugoslavia" (November 4, 1942), and "Danubian Confederation" (January 1, 1943).

Just the listing of specific economic problems was sufficient to deter the erstwhile peacemakers from suggesting any political principles for postwar cohabitation. On Austria everyone agreed that she should be re-detached from Germany.

In view of the present Balkan crisis the paper on Yugoslavia deserves careful rereading. The authors rightly centered on the future of Serbia. Assuming that the starting point would be the inevitable separation between Serbia and Croatia, four alternatives for the former appeared plausible: (i) membership in a Danubian Union, along with Croatia and Slovenia (Bosnia is not mentioned) or "South Slavia (i.e. Yugoslavia)"; (ii) independence of Serbia; (iii) membership in a Balkan Union; (iv) inclusion in the USSR, if Romania and Bulgaria were also included. The authors appear absolutely helpless to tackle Bosnia because "the mingling of Serbs, Croats and Moslems baffles the desire to draw an agreed frontier. History has here produced an awkward situation" (p. 178). Indeed, a very awkward one, mutters with sympathy one reviewer of the year 1997, until he stumbles upon the following sentence suggested already some 55 years ago, that "the best method of settlement would be the imposition by the United Nations of a frontier based on geography, economics and, as far as possible, on national sentiment" (p. 179).

The ultimate objective in the region was to launch the project of a Danubian Union, which was a special cross-breed between the planned northern and southern confederations. The authors finally reached, willy-nilly, the conclusion that the reintegration of Yugoslavia in a new form stood a better chance to become part of the Danubian Confederation, and that it would be the best solution within the larger area "lying between the USSR and Germany" which was expected to exist after the war with some degree of autonomy.

The final document is a paper entitled "The Attitude of the USSR" (February 2, 1943). This is the only paper in the collection dealing with the most plausible postwar alternative, namely the Soviet occupation of eastern Europe. The authors took a rather sympathetic view of the forthcoming Soviet occupation of eastern Europe, expressing the conviction that in harshness their occupation could certainly not outdo the German one. The British guess that Moscow would prefer two rather than one large confederation in eastern Europe remains un-

confirmed, because we do know now from Milovan Djilas and others that Stalin would tolerate nothing less than direct control of the satrapy which might have been, for the attention of western viewers, nicely dressed up with trinkets of sovereignty. The analysts largely ignored the economic factor which would have given them the opportunity to think about the Soviet model of economic autarky directed against the free market economy. The implications, economic as well as political, of cutting off east European economies from their traditional trade exchanges built over centuries were to be disastrous. The speculation of the FRPS about western economic influences prevailing in eastern Europe after the war proved unrealistic. The FRPS, however, suggested another alternative scenario based on the assumption that east central Europe would be reconstructed through its own strength, but with Anglo-American support. This option was quite feasible, since the Americans in particular possessed unlimited material resources and manufacturing capacities to create:

an area, revived and flourishing through Western aid, just across the Soviet border, [which] would bring the Soviet people into too close proximity to an effective non-communist economy, and thus cause internal unrest in the Union itself even though this was no part of the aim of the Western Powers (p. 213).

In their final prognosis the FRPS experts were, as usual, close to the truth—but not quite correct. They foresaw two developments. First, the countries of east central Europe would unite in one or two confederations, thereby diminishing the danger of German influence for a long time. They believed that the latter would be the ultimate aim of the Soviets, no matter how fervently opposed by the Soviet leadership, who objected to the idea of confederation outside Soviet control. Second, it was to be anticipated that the Russians would establish their own sphere of influence in the region and these states would be bound to Moscow by means of political and military institutions and alliances. Commentary on the second observation is superfluous: it was right on target. Moreover, the authors did foresee a polarization in east central Europe into two ideologically opposed blocs, one which was friendly toward the Russians (Serbians, Bulgarians and Czechs) and the other opposing the Russians (Croats, Hungarians, Poles, Romanians, and Slovenes).

With regard to the formation of individual states, the draftsmen were of the opinion that, because of the close-knit relationship with the Bulgarians and Serbs, the Russians would prefer a Balkan Union in the south. This

was another illustration of the inevitable partition between two blocs: the northern (Danubian) confederation under the Anglo-Americans, and the southern (Balkan) under Russian control. Mutual relations between the Anglo-Saxon alliance and the Soviets could be improved, the draftsmen suggested, through a series of tradeoffs, such as Soviet suspension of the Comintern propaganda in exchange for Western abdication of its concern for what we would nowadays call human rights. The perennial dilemma between Cold War and Detente had been spelled out already. However, the authors did not envisage a cold war-type confrontation, but rather a war-free encounter, a manageable situation in which the Soviet Union, severely exhausted by the end of the hostilities, would need the aid of the western powers as much as the small countries of eastern Europe.

In his summary note Andras Ban makes a slightly trivializing point about the immature schemes for confederation that the FRPS people drafted at the beginning of the war. Contrary to his patronizing verdict, I would rate them higher. At the same time one must notice the shortcomings of the draftsmen in the second half of 1942. This was the turning moment of the war, not immediately noticed, following the decisive battles of World War II in the Euro-Atlantic theaters of war, that helped tip the tide of war in favor of the Allies: El Alamein, Stalingrad, and the Battle of the Atlantic.

The FRPS authors seem to have produced their drafts on the future of central Europe as if “lying between the USSR and Germany,” in the same geopolitical setting as existed in the preceding century and a half when the great power Austria-Hungary was there. They also envisioned a settlement by a traditional peace conference, rather than anticipating the Unconditional Surrender strategy. Consequently, the FRPS tended to view the Soviet Union as a traditional great power, thus underrating the role of ideology in the shaping of its dictatorial institutions.

In summing up, one can immediately detect the shortcomings of Ban’s book: too few documents and too brief a period, revealing neither the nuances of opinions, nor the range of radical changes which the geostrategic position of east central Europe underwent both under German and Soviet occupation. First, consider the mass transfers of population in eastern Europe. It cannot be ruled out that the Czechoslovak wartime leader President Benes, who became since 1942 the advocate of the mass expulsion of the German and Hungarian population from Czechoslovakia, owed a great portion of his radical-

ism to FRPS drafts. For Benes wanted nothing less than to inflate the territory of pre-Munich Czechoslovakia with an entirely homogeneous Slavic population. This was to take place inside an historical territory which for centuries had always been multiethnic. Thus, the movement of more than 20 million people that took place throughout eastern Europe between 1944 and 1947, consisting predominantly of German civilian populations, and the Holocaust of European Jews, marked the two most profound changes in the ethnic structure of eastern Europe. The editor could thus have considered several more draft documents on population transfer in his selection. Missing, for instance, is the FRPS memorandum on the transfer of German population of 13 February 1942, whose inclusion in the present collection appears imperative in view of the resumption of violent population transfers in the Balkans in the 1990s.

Is the present form of the book the ideal one? A different editorial approach could have been tried, namely to publish more documents but less completely. See for instance the book by Graham Ross,[2] which contains almost fifty documents and minutes from the PRO archives, covering much wider scope and more varied subjects.

One can now understand what were the wrong assumptions under which the FRPS acted: that Germany would remain the main enemy (cf. F.K. Roberts' minutes of 13 September 1942, p. 100: that all the alliances and confederations should be directed towards "our primary

aim of keeping Germany down"). In 1945 Hitler's Greater German threat to the region collapsed. Instead Stalin's dictatorship, leading the new socialist camp stretching across all eastern Europe to the Elbe River, emerged as the major challenge to democracies. The final word will have to come from the Russian archives, for I am assuming that similar long-term drafts for postwar eastern Europe, produced by the Soviet equivalent of the FRPS, are still there, awaiting evaluation.

Notes:

[1]. Ignac Romsics, *Wartime American Plans for a New Hungary: Documents from the U.S. Department of State 1942-1944*. War and Society in East Central Europe, vol. 30; East European Monographs, no. 354; Atlantic Studies on Society in Change, no. 77 (Boulder, Colo.: Highland Lakes, N.J.: New York: Social Science Monographs; Atlantic Research and Publications; Distributed by Columbia University Press 1992).

[2]. Graham Ross, ed., *The Foreign Office and the Kremlin: British Documents on Anglo-Soviet Relations 1941-45* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the reviewer and to HABSBERG. For other permission, please contact <reviews@h-net.msu.edu> and <habsburg@ttacs6.ttu.edu>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/habsburg>

**Citation:** Milan Hauner. Review of Ban, Andras D., ed., *Pax Britannica: Wartime Foreign Office Documents Regarding Plans for a Postbellum East Central Europe*. HABSBERG, H-Net Reviews. November, 1997.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1495>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).