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GÖ¡bor BÖ¡tony. *Britain and Central Europe 1918-1933.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999. viii + 240 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-820748-1.

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The end of the First World War was followed by a complete readjustment of frontiers and identities in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as in Africa and the Middle East. While the British Empire further expanded its territories, its main competitors in Europe–the German, Russian, and Austro-Hungarian empires–imploded and disappeared. For Britain it was less than a triumph, because the power vacuum thus created was not easy to fill, and generated political and economic uncertainty. This book deals with the British contribution to the first sustained attempt to "recast bourgeois" Central Europe. As we live through times that offer disquieting parallels with the unsettled 1920s, BÃ¡tony's well-researched book will be read as a highly topical and thought-provoking thesis. Concentrating on the activities of British diplomats and their close links with a number of Czech, Austrian, and Hungarian statesmen, the author argues that Britain played an important role in the restoration of peace and stability in the Danubian area in 1918-25. The book consists largely of three interlinked case studies, each focusing, respectively, on Vienna, Budapest, and Prague. Seldom if ever before had the British Foreign Office been embarrassed with such a wealth of expertise among its officials. In the post-war years its policy-makers were advised by a range of high-powered academics-turned-diplomats (and vice versa) such as R.W. Seton Watson, E.H. Carr, Harold Temperley, Lewis Namier, and Arnold Toynbee. Though they often disagreed on matters of interpretation, policy, and ideological orientation, on the whole they provided the Foreign Office with a competent, perceptive, and sophisticated understanding of what was going on in this troubled part of the continent. Their unique insights were generally put to good use, until London decided to distance itself from central European affairs from the end of the 1920s and especially in 1931-33. This happened–the author argues–not because of German pressure, but because of the Central European governments unwillingness to co-operate with British plans. Surprisingly, the onset of the Great Depression and the new domestic and imperial priorities which it generated–an important theme in Appeasement studies–play no major role in this study.

Active British involvement in Danubian affairs represented a new departure for the Foreign Office. It was brought about by the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in November 1918, followed by bitter national rivalries between the successor states. Such instability was compounded by the Bolshevik threat. With a civil war in Russia, and Communist experiments and unrest mushrooming out all over Central Europe (including Germany and Italy, albeit briefly), London had plenty of reasons to worry. The dismemberment of the Habsburg Empire had not been one of its war aims: most definitely, the

Foreign Office "did not set out on a Nationality Crusade" (p. 12). When the latter took place nevertheless, fuelled by Bolshevik and Wilsonian pronouncements, there was dismay and impatience at the Foreign Office. The new "nation states" made no sense, and London officials had little time for them: as Sir George Clerk remarked in a moment of exasperation, he wished that "the whole lot, Czechs, Magyars, Poles, Jugos, Roumanians should be put in a bag and shaken up and handed over to a decent Briton to administer" (p. 13).

Of course, the government and most area specialists were far too realistic and well informed to indulge in this sort of neo-imperial dream. Worried by the possible long-term revival of the wartime German "Mittel-Europa" plan (which was perceived as a formidable threat to British power in both the Middle East and India), they considered various plans to stabilize the area, including some new form of supranational state or federation, or at least of a Danubian economic union which would counteract the insane national revanchism of the new states and avoid the creation of a zone of hostile and weak countries. In Vienna, in July 1919, Sir Thomas Cunninghame–a supporter of a Habsburg restoration–tried to convince Otto Bauer that Austria should draw closer to Hungary: this was to no avail, as the two countries were drifting further apart under the influence of contrasting nationalist movements. His colleague in Prague was equally active in the attempt to foster a rapprochement between Czechoslovakia and Austria.

In addition to the concerns of power politics, there was also concern about growing poverty and economic distress in the area: in this respect the strategy of the "men on the spot" reflected the sense of guilt about "the economic consequences of the peace," which prompted John Maynard Keynes and other Liberals to demand a "watering down" of the financial clauses of the Austrian peace treaty. Their advice was rejected by both the Treasury and Lloyd George, who had contrasting priorities and different perceptions of the situation: as Robert Cecil put it in April 1919, "[if] ...we seek to impose moderate terms of peace, we may now be too late to save the enemy countries from Bolshevism, and we may, through disappointment, produce Bolshevism among the Allies" (p. 85). On one point, however, there was agreement: "[t]he experts of the Central Department believed that the Danubian region's best chances lay in the creation of a free-trade area." However, "even in London opinion was fiercely divided on the way of breaking down the existing tariff walls between the Successor States." Whatever proposals were put forward, they were jeopardized by Danubian politicians: in particular, "BenéÃ ...readily blocked a tariff agreement in central Europe, because he was aware of the fact that Britain would only support such a plan if she could preserve the most-favoured-nation treatment for herself" (p. 55). By contrast, London feared that a Zollverein dominated by Prague would be instrumental in ousting Britain from Central European markets. Some favored a customs union between Austria and Hungary, but Balfour had strong misgivings, though he regarded "the threat" of such a union as a useful means of applying pressure on Prague and Belgrade, and inducing them to be "more reasonable" in their treatment of Austria.

Despite these contradictions and confusions, throughout the 1920s the idea of a customs union was the chief strategy endorsed by London, which distrusted and feared economic, even more than political, nationalism. In this respect, the problem was compounded by the different perceptions of the aims of "free trade," a topic recently examined by Peter Marsh in an important monograph on late-Victorian commercial liberalism (1999, see accompanying review, ed.). Britain was impatient with bilateral treaties between individual successor states, treaties that the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir Austen Chamberlain, regarded as incompatible with the project of an all-encompassing Zollverein. Moreover, the widely shared notion that Austria was "on her death bed"–bound to be annexed by Germany unless an unlikely Danubian federation was established–sapped Britain's trust in one of her chief regional partners. Eventually, by 1931 London gave up on the idea of bringing about stability and growth by means of the creation of a supranational area organization. As one leading official put it, " '[a] Union of five beggars will not make a rich man'. It is pure illusion that we can reconstitute the economic unity of the Austro-Hungarian Empire" (p. 66).

The story could be repeated, with few changes, about British attitudes to Hungary. In this case, British hostility towards anti-Habsburg nationalists was compounded by BÃ©la Kun's Communist credentials: the two most feared enemies seemed to be rolled into one in the post-war Budapest regime. In the short term the solution consisted of a policy of "wait and see": Jan Christian Smuts came back from his 1919 diplomatic mission persuaded that Kun should be left to the tender mercies of Hungary's regional enemies. The events of the following weeks proved how dangerous such a policy was, but the prediction that Kun's regime would not last long was confirmed. After its fall, London again sent a diplomatic mission, this time under Sir George Clerk, to manage the

aftermath. The resulting regime, under Admiral Horthy, was perceived as a more promising partner, since Horthy was regarded as "a man of sterling honesty but no cleverness" (p. 116). In the end, however, Hungary drew closer to France than Britain, and, in the 1930s, fell under Mussolini's spell.

In the case of Czechoslovakia, Britain dealt with a new country–rather than a former enemy–and one of stronger democratic commitment. Yet, London's half-hearted support for the new regime, and the latter's Francophile inclinations, made for a difficult relationship. Once again, the basic problem was that the British approach was based on the hope that from the chaos of opposing nationalisms, a new Austro-Hungarian federation or Zollverein would emerge. This explains why "British policy…was pro-Austrian, pro-Hungarian and pro-Czechoslovak at the same time. The success of such an ambitious plan in the Danubian triangle was to a large degree dependent on the interrelations of the three Central European states" (p. 179). However, such relations were often tense, and sometimes critically so: indeed, in 1921 Czechoslovakia and Hungary were actually on the verge of war. Even after the crisis was over, "BenêÃ had no intention of allowing the rehabilitation of Hungary" (p. 193), and by 1923 his inflexible diplomacy led to a cooling-off in Anglo-Czechoslovak relations. British disenchantment, shared by J. Ramsay MacDonald during his short term in office, grew stronger after 1925.

This change was not caused–BÃ¡tony argues–by German economic predominance or Hitler's rise to power in 1933, and was completed well before the 1938 Munich agreement. It was due mainly to "the failure to reconstruct a Danubian league of states and promote free trade in the region." Things were made worse by the fact that "[u]nlike Britain, France succeeded in creating an alliance system in Central Europe, but it excluded the British-sponsored former enemy states such as Austria and Hungary." To the Foreign Office military alliances and "pacts" without free trade and some rehabilitation of Austria and Hungary were a recipe for disaster. Furthermore, they distrusted the French, and saw their penetration in the area as a challenge to British economic interests" (p. 223). While the situation would have demanded close collaboration between London and Paris, "Anglo-French rivalry…only highlighted the political and economic divisions in the region and facilitated future German expansion in SÃ¼dostraum" (p. 223).

It is a powerful and suggestive interpretation. Despite the title, most of the book is concerned primarily with the period 1919-1925. The 1930s provide the context for the epilogue for each of the three case studies as well as for the book as a whole. BÃ¡tony's thesis could have important implications for the debate on Appeasement, but the author does not really explore them here. Neither does he discuss the general impact of the Great Slump, which destroyed markets and financial fortunes, and brought to an end a century of British free trade. Surely, the cataclysm must have affected prospects of any form of commercial liberalism in the Danubian area as well: if the British strategy had failed in the roaring 20s, it was unlikely that it could have better prospects after 1931. The British policy change was part of a general move towards imperial isolation, brought about by the collapse of the world economy. Free trade, which had underpinned the British approach to Central European reconstruction in 1919-25, was no longer viable: even Britain adopted imperial preference. Thus it is no surprise that "in the second half of the 1930s British interest in Czechoslovak-Hungarian rapprochement was purely 'academic'…the Foreign Office, after a long process of ˆÃgeopolitical devaluation', had finally relinquished responsibility for the whole troubled zone of Central Europe" (pp. 225-6). Simultaneously the weakness of the European economies, and eventually the rise of Hitler, discouraged further attempts. After 1933 a "neo-imperial" solution was again conceivable, but involved German expansionism rather than a Danubian federation: by 1938 "a British diplomat openly aired his view to an American colleague that 'Austria and Czechoslovakia had no right to separate existence' and that German hegemony in the region was ˆÃnot only inevitable but desirable' " (pp. 222-3).

The latter is a tantalizing thought, which strengthens a certain view about the Appeasers. They operated within an "imperial" frame of mind, which was impervious to, and dismissive of, the Wilsonian emphasis on the virtues of national self-determination. Indeed, BÃ¡tony's analysis of the British handling of Central Europe affairs documents the extent to which British officials displayed a typically imperialist mixture of professional competence (including a remarkably perceptive understanding of men and cultures), and an "orientalist" sense of superiority. They affected to believe that the Hungarians would prefer to have "an English Prince" to become their king and sort them out (p. 112), or even to become a British protectorate. More generally, such a superiority complex was based on stereotypes about hierarchies of "races" and "national characters": thus in 1923 one official warned the Treasury that "the Austrian is by nature docile, while the Hungarian essentially the reverse"

(p. 133), and another solemnly stated that "the Hungarians are the strongest race in Southern Eastern Europe" (p. 117). As for the Czechs, Clerk informed Curzon that they had, "from long association with the Germans, absorbed certain qualities which made them, of all Slav peoples, the most stable and more efficient: tenacious, industrious, apt for gain, sober and moderate in foreign policy, and innately hostile to Bolshevism" (p. 170). Notably, such or similar stereotypes were also applied to fellow British and imperial officials: thus both Seton Watson and Jan Smuts were reputed to display "Prussian" characteristics–supposedly consisting of a straightforward, realistic, no-nonsense ability to deal with people and problems. If these attitudes are reminiscent of "orientalist" themes, there was, on the other hand, more than an ornamentalist streak in British responses to individual interlocutors: not surprisingly, they related well to fellow Harrovian Hungarian diplomats, and liked Horthy because he was "a gentleman." Unfortunately, the future of Central Europe was not going to be decided by "gentlemen": this was, in a nutshell, the reason for the failure of the British strategy.

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