REVIEW ESSAY

Twilight of Empire: The Brest-Litovsk Conference and the Remaking of East-Central Europe, 1917–1918. By Borislav Chernev. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017. xx, 301 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Glossary. Index. Illustrations. Photographs. Maps. $75.00, hard bound.

Britain and Interwar Danubian Europe: Foreign Policy and Security Challenges, 1919–1936. By Dragan Bakić. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. xviii, 264 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Photographs. Maps. $114.00, hard bound.

Great Expectations and Interwar Realities: Hungarian Cultural Diplomacy, 1918–1941. By Zsolt Nagy. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2017. xviii, 341 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. Plates. $65.00, hard bound.

The flux and reflux of empires has shaped the outlines and character of the lands between for centuries, and never more than in the twentieth. To be sure, at their apogee in the Renaissance the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth or the Kingdom of Hungary could claim a quasi-imperial status of their own, but by the 19th century the heart of Europe, from the Baltic to the Black Sea, had long fallen under the sway of Ottomans, Habsburgs, and Romanovs. The progressive debilitation of the first, characterized as the "sick man of Europe," stimulated the ambitions of the other two. The coincident popularization of an ideology—inspired by the French Revolution—linking nationhood and statehood, challenged imperial rule throughout the region. Habsburg-Romanov solidarity put an end to the Hungarian revolution of 1848–49. The Polish revolts of 1830 and 1863 were similarly crushed by Tsarist Russia. The Balkan Wars of 1912–13 led to the emergence of nominally independent states and Habsburg protectorates in the region. Few suspected that the shots fired by a Bosnian student on June 28, 1914 in Sarajevo would lead to the collapse of the entire multi-imperial system.

The three historical studies in question address aspects of the reconstruction of central Europe in the wake of World War I. They are essentially exercises in conventional diplomatic history, without much pretense at theoretical innovation, and none the worse for that. The reconfiguration of post-imperial Europe at the Paris Peace Conference has been much studied and debated, most notably in relation to the origins of the Second World War. These debates focus typically on the peace terms imposed on Germany and the eventual emergence of Hitler's revanchist regime. Here, the focus is rather on the relatively novel principle of self-determination as a conflation of nationhood and statehood. The Brest-Litovsk armistice talks, initiated in December 1917 between the Central Powers and Russia, were inspired by the new Bolshevik regime's call for peace without annexations or indemnities, and the right of nations to self-determination, all to be achieved through open diplomacy. As Borislav Chernev relates with clarity and ample documentation, these sporadic negotiations pitted a Germany intent on concentrating its forces on the Western Front, together with its exhausted Austro-Hungarian, Bulgarian, and

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Ottoman allies, against a nascent ruling cabal of Russian leftists hoping to consolidate their power and gain time in the expectation of world revolution. Keenly aware of the power of propaganda, the head of the Russian delegation, Lev Trotskii, insisted that the world press be kept abreast of the talks' progress. Russia no longer controlled Poland, Lithuania, part of Latvia, Finland or Ukraine, and Vienna dreamed of incorporating Congress Poland and Galicia into a restructured Habsburg Monarchy. Thus the Central Powers took up Lenin's cue and, even before Woodrow Wilson had presented his Fourteen Points to Congress, included in their peace terms self-determination for these territories, with the addition of Estonia, whose Germanic elite lobbied for pan-German solidarity. Neither these protagonists nor, for that matter, Wilson, offered much guidance as to the precise definition and application of this liberal principle. One can assume that for Lenin and Trotskii, self-determination meant the freedom of the laboring classes to choose Bolshevism. Russia's western allies stoically acknowledged that they could not halt its quest for a separate peace; moreover, they had already compromised their democratic ideals by secret wartime agreements that promised Austrian territory to Italy, Southern Slav to Serbia, and Hungarian (Transylvania) to Romania, without any pretense at self-determination.

In the Habsburg lands, food shortages and strikes in early 1918 added to the urgency of peace on the Eastern Front, and Vienna perceived that the popular attractiveness of revolutionary change had to be checked. Emergency measures stabilized the situation, and the crisis reinforced the Central Powers' support for Ukraine, newly autonomous amidst the chaos of Bolshevik Russia, and a rich granary to boot. After parallel talks at Brest-Litovsk, they signed a treaty with the Ukrainian People's Republic on February 10, 1918. The accord afforded legitimacy to sovereign Ukraine, which for a brief interlude received military protection from the Central Powers.

The objectives of the participants at the central Brest-Litovsk negotiations remained unchanged: world revolution for Petrograd, quiet on the Eastern Front for the Central Powers. In this waiting game, the latter prevailed. Unlike Trotskii, Lenin considered that consolidation of Bolshevik power took precedence over world revolution. Trotskii stuck to his calculatedly ambiguous "no war, no peace" negotiating position. Russian delay tactics drove the Germans to renew military operations in February 1918, notably in the Baltic region, and one of the ifs of history is what might have followed a German occupation of Petrograd and the consequent downfall of the Bolshevik regime (never mind that Berlin had sent Lenin back to the Finland Station in the first place). Faced by a German ultimatum, the All-Russian Central Executive Committee endorsed Lenin's recommendation to accept the peace terms on February 23. Among these were the recognition of Finland and Ukraine as independent states. With regard to the latter, this was nullified at war's end, and Bolshevik dominion was restored over Ukraine, but the episode entered Ukrainian historiography as a milestone of national statehood.

British Foreign Office records are the principal source of Dragan Bakić's study, and they reflect Whitehall's enduring priority: maintaining the balance of power and regional stability without avoidable alliance commitments. At the Paris Peace Conference, France's Georges Clémenceau was determined to

weaken Germany and surround it with a cordon sanitaire of similarly-minded new states. David Lloyd George showed little interest in the reconfiguration of Danubian Europe beyond the case of Poland emerging from the defunct German, Austrian, and Russian empires. The Foreign Office was momentarily under the influence of *The New Europe* ideology, which championed the right to self-determination of the Dual Monarchy's oppressed nationalities. One of the founding patrons of this journal was the Czech scholar and ardent nationalist Tomáš Masaryk; the historian and publicist R.W. Seton-Watson served as its indefatigable moving spirit. Their objective, echoed by numerous Czech nationalist organizations on both sides of the Atlantic, was to legitimate and render self-evident the need to liquidate the Habsburg Dual Monarchy and carve out of its remains new or expanded successor states, with first among equals a Czecho-Slovakia standard-bearer of European Enlightenment. Led by the British newspaper magnate Lord Northcliffe, a potent propaganda campaign was managed from Crewe House to ultimately destroy the Dual Monarchy.

Seton-Watson's influence in Whitehall declined over time, but his espousal of the Czech cause and friendship with Masaryk and Prime Minister Edvard Beneš never flagged. In the chaotic circumstances of central Europe in 1919, including a Polish-Russian war and a short-lived Bolshevik regime in Budapest that gave way to Romanian and Serbo-French occupation, the criteria of national self-determination became essentially political. The Treaty of Trianon (1920) reduced Hungary's territory by two-thirds to the benefit of Czecho-Slovakia, Romania, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia), and even Austria; as a consequence, over three million ethnic Magyars found themselves under foreign rule. Ironically, if truncated Hungary was left with few minorities, the three successor states acquired a markedly multi-national aspect. Czecho-Slovakia encompassed large Austro-German and Magyar minorities, and even the Slovaks felt lorded over by the Czechs. Romania now included sizeable Magyar and Germanic populations as well as Ukrainians and, in the Dobrudja, Bulgarians; while in the south a Serbian king ruled uneasily over a multiplicity of fractious national entities and ethnic groups.

With the consolidation of Bolshevik power in Russia and the creation of the Communist International (Comintern), Europe became the cockpit of an ideological civil war. The application at the Paris Peace Conference of the principle of national self-determination consecrated the nation-state as the model of democratic modernity while differentiating between the rights of defeated and victorious or successor national communities. The attempt to clothe the authentic national interests and security concerns of the peacemakers in the garb of impartial arbitration was doomed from the start. In addition to Germany, Hungary and Bulgaria felt the sting of injustice, and few would question that Hungary was the most flagrant victim of partiality. The outcome was a deadlock between the successor states, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia, formed into an anti-Hungarian alliance, actively encouraged by France and known as the Little Entente, which endured until German and Italian arbitration in the wake of Munich in 1937 satisfied some of Hungary's demands for revision of frontiers.

In Bakić's analysis, which is more thorough on the Balkans than on narrowly-defined central Europe, the Little Entente blamed Hungary's aristocratic elite for pursuing a policy of revisionism (if not integral irredentism aiming to restore the quasi-mythical land of the Crown of St. Stephen). To be sure, the regime of Admiral Miklós Horthy and his prime minister, István Bethlen, was less committed to liberal democracy than was Prague's bourgeoisie elite. But Bakić leaves it at that, allowing a deservedly complimentary footnote (41n199) to Thomas L. Sakmyster's *Hungary, the Great Powers, and the Danubian Crisis 1936–1939* (Athens, GA, 1980). In fact, the thrust of Sakmyster's argument is that the overwhelming majority of Magyars, notably the educated classes (12), passionately decried the Trianon dictate. The government deplored extreme irredentist movements, gave some support to more moderate, revisionist ones, and by the mid-1920s felt secure enough to openly espouse revisionism on the grounds of ethnic distribution. Whatever the threats from the Little Entente, whatever the hostility or indifference of France and Britain, no Hungarian government could have survived politically a pragmatic acquiescence to the terms of Trianon. (A further, minor correction to Bakić's account concerns the interception in 1928 of a rail shipment of machine gun parts from Italy to Hungary: the Austrian customs inspectors were at the Austro-Hungarian border crossing of St. Gotthard and not on the Alpine, Italian frontier [106]).

Such quibbles do not alter the reality of the standoff. The Little Entente, led by Beneš, was obsessively (and perhaps calculatedly) warning against a Habsburg restauration in Hungary, to which Karl von Habsburg contributed by attempting on two occasions in 1921 to reach Budapest. The Horthy regime, desperate to secure western loans and be admitted to the League of Nations, rebuffed the monarch, but neither the successor states nor Hungary or Bulgaria budged from their respective positions and grievances. France had no reservations in backing the Little Entente. As Bakić amply illustrates, Britain, which was party to the installation of the Horthy regime, sought to preserve stability in central Europe by a certain even-handedness bordering on indifference, and spiced by suspicions of French deceitfulness. Whitehall's envoys initially reinforced Prague's enhanced status as a pillar of democracy and stability in the region, but over time this shifted to a sharply-critical appraisal of Beneš's manipulative tactics. In the Balkan capitals, British diplomats tended to disparage the local regimes as corrupt and inefficient; and the Hungarian regime benefited from comparative understanding for its efforts to cope with the social and economic consequences of Trianon. France's commitment to King Alexander's Yugoslavia did not please a Whitehall anxious about the possibility of Serb-Bulgarian-Macedonian moves to seize the Greek region around Thessaloniki, preferring to keep open the option of constructive Italian pressure, with Mussolini having his eyes on Albania and beyond.

The assassination of the King, along with French Foreign Minister Louis Barthou, at Marseille in October 1934, was a reminder that the clash of national identities emboldened by the peace treaties was far from settled. The perpetrator was a Bulgarian linked to Croatian and Macedonian nationalists. Indeed, by the mid-1930s, as Hitler began to flex Germany's military muscles, British policy was coming around to the conclusion that the Paris peace treaties would have to undergo some rectification. At the Foreign Office,

Deputy Under-Secretary Alexander Cadogan noted in May 1936 that while the Versailles treaty was of course at the top of the agenda, "particularly in the case of the Treaty of Trianon, the territorial settlement certainly *would* be called in question" (Bakić, 181). Opportunistic appeasement of Hitler was no doubt a bad calculation, but neither the League nor penultimate security pacts could quell the rampant nationalism—be it defensive, revisionist, or neo-imperialist—unleashed by the peacemakers.

The Great War left another legacy applicable in times of war as well as peace: the manipulation of public opinion. To be sure, rulers and their challengers have resorted to more or less honest suasion for centuries, but propaganda was pursued by the major powers—perhaps least, and least effectively, by the Dual Monarchy—with unprecedented energy during the war. As noted, the lobbying activities of *The New Europe* and émigré organizations for national self-determination meshed neatly with Wilsonian principles to shape the discourse and outcomes of the peace conference. The losers, notably the Hungarians, concluded that their misfortunes owed much to a failure to present abroad, over time, a positive image of their country. Then again, the same western countries that had applauded Lajos Kossuth and the revolution of 1848–49 were less susceptible to endorse later, less liberal political forces intent on Magyarizing minorities that made up half of the country's population.

Trianon Hungary was militarily powerless, economically exhausted, and surrounded by hostile neighbors. The popular frustration expressed in the slogan "*nem, nem soha*" (signifying "no, no never" will we accept this dictate) was ignored or deplored by the Great Powers. The regime thus turned to the only option, cultural diplomacy. In a work of high scholarly quality, Zsolt Nagy relates the historical background, local and international context, and political execution of this approach. The main architect of Budapest's cultural diplomacy was Minister of Culture Kuno Klebelsberg, and the objective, reduced to its immodest essentials, was to impress on the world Hungary's cultural superiority—as first among equals in the region—and western roots (9). There were other components to this national image that may have been slightly out of tune with the times: Hungary as an early adherent to western Christianity, Hungary as an outpost of the Early Renaissance under King Matthias, Hungary as the sacrificial bulwark against Ottoman expansion, Hungary as a thousand-year old kingdom in the heart of Europe. Once the world recognized these historical merits, the country could proceed to attain its ultimate goal, revision of the Treaty of Trianon. In practice, Budapest did devote great effort and expenditure to promote a "national renaissance" in all fields of culture broadly defined, from literature to architecture, and communicate this to the world. By the late 1920s, these activities were openly acknowledged as aiming to serve "peaceful revisionism."

To be sure, Hungary was far from alone in espousing cultural diplomacy. The Great Powers and the successor states joined in the promotion of their culture and values, thus the Quai d'Orsay's creation of cultural-diplomatic posts and institutions in numerous countries, the British Council, the Italian Dante Alighieri Society, and of course the USSR's ideological campaign. In the successor states, Prague was particularly assiduous in polishing its favorable

image; a source cited by Nagy reports that in the 1930s the propaganda department of the Czech foreign ministry paid twenty-six French newspapers and other news outlets for positive reporting (138). In opening up lines of communication and promoting mutual knowledge, cultural diplomacy was by definition a positive phenomenon, even if the deeper national interests it served seemed at times irreconcilable. It did not change the course of history, however, for calculations of economic and military power generally overrode the positive consequences of what is now called "soft power." Cultural diplomacy did not save Czechoslovakia at Munich. It may have helped Budapest to obtain territorial concessions in the Vienna Awards of 1938 (part of the former Upper Hungary, at the expense of Czechoslovakia) and 1940 (northern Transylvania, at the expense of Romania), but those arbitrations owed more to Mussolini's tactical support for Hungarian revisionism, dating back to 1927.

In the first part of his work, Nagy provides well-documented accounts, enriched by apt references to more theoretical and thematic studies, of the political-cultural setting in Hungary during and after World War I. The chapter on "Defining the Nation" offers succinct yet highly instructive insights into the nature of national identity and of the nation-state, and addresses the literary-intellectual cleavage of the interwar period in Hungary between cosmopolitan "urbanists" and "populists" inspired by the deeper national roots and economic distress of the peasantry. Nagy then moves on to three selected spheres of cultural diplomacy. First, scholarly activities: scholarly journals, including the *Nouvelle Revue de Hongrie* (1932) and *Hungarian Quarterly* (1935), conferences, exchanges, and a small network of old and new cultural outposts in Vienna, Berlin, Rome, Paris, and New York City. Second, the encouragement of inbound tourism, and third, the dissemination of radio programs and films presenting a desirable image of Hungary. Nagy concludes that all this cultural propaganda, however well-conceived and whatever its genuine services to national pride (there is little data that might allow the historian to propose a better-documented cost-benefit analysis), was vitiated by a "bad" (revisionist) foreign policy resting on a "mistaken interpretation of geopolitical realities" (293). The truth may be somewhat simpler, if no more reassuring. Small, defeated countries are particularly vulnerable pawns in the turbulent world of power politics, and chess games are seldom won by pawns.

The later evolution of states and nations in central Europe is beyond the compass of these worthy studies, but there are striking elements of continuity as well as of change. In the next World War, and in the Cold War, propaganda and cultural diplomacy reached new heights of stridency and institutionalization. Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, and numerous other western organs strove to assure the peoples of the lands between, restored more or less to their prewar borders but now vassals of the Soviet empire, that their eventual liberation from imperial rule was a matter of time. Few anticipated an early and peaceable end, yet what Vladimir Putin famously decried (in 2005) as the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century" did come about: the Soviet Union's surrender of empire and its own implosion. In the process, central Europe initially regained its interwar configuration, in a frenzy of restored nation-statehood. The Baltic states took advantage of the disarray in the Kremlin to proclaim their independence. Belarus (where the Bolsheviks

had crushed a secessionist attempt at the end of World War I) and Moldova (along with other members farther east) rose to statehood, and Ukraine finally regained sovereign status.

The problems of melding nationhood and statehood were far from settled in the region, not to speak of Russia's resurgent nationalism. Two regional pillars of the new order created in 1919 succumbed to the centripetal force of national self-determination. Czechoslovakia split peacefully into its two main parts, while Yugoslavia exploded into fragments in a series of often violent confrontations accompanied by NATO intervention. Most of the German minorities in the region had been expelled after the World War II or, in the case of Nicolae Ceausescu's Romania, bought out for cash by Bonn. Hungary continued to claim a right of inspection over the fate of Magyar minorities, and indeed offered them a second, Hungarian citizenship that proved popular but scarcely alleviated the suspicions of the reconfigured successor states, that is Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania, and Serbia. Membership in the European Union has not prevented a cluster of central European states from challenging Brussels' request to harbor refugees. The lure of autonomy or full sovereignty (bearing the threat of further fragmentation) is very much alive in parts of Europe, touching Scots, Flemings, Catalans, Corsicans, and even some Northern Italians. Finally, Russian operations against Georgia, the annexation of Crimea, and covert intervention in the Donbass signaled that imperial dreams had not entirely dissipated. The consolidation of the states of central Europe under the umbrella of NATO and the European Union may be more enduring than the system constructed in 1919, but full peace and harmony are proving elusive.

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