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Review Article

The History of SSEES: The Political Dimension

MAURICE PEARTON

Roberts, I. W. *History of the School of Slavonic and East European Studies 1915–1990*. School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London, 1991. xi + 124 pp. Photographs. Select bibliography. £9.95.

THIS writer's copy of 'Disraeli, Gladstone and the Eastern Question', published in 1935, bears on the flyleaf the inscription 'BP dd RWSW. In memory of twenty years of Slavonic conspiracy!'.¹ As an aphoristic summary of the origins of the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES), it contains more than a grain of truth: R. W. Seton-Watson, Bernard Pares, aided by Ronald Burrows, Principal of King's College London, conspired together to put 'Slavonic Studies' on the intellectual and institutional map of British academic life. Pares had founded in 1907, during the splendid *Gründerjahre* of Liverpool University, a school devoted to the study of Russian and Polish, in which training in language and literature was used to explore the wider culture in terms of history, economics and law. He had thus pioneered 'area studies', in our contemporary sense, in Britain. Seton-Watson, who first met Pares only in 1915, had no such institutional framework. His researches into the other empire in Eastern Europe, the Habsburg Monarchy, had been backed by private resources, sustained by a conviction that they conferred on him a positive obligation to undertake work that those who had to earn their own living could not attempt. He had become known as a publicist and commentator on current international politics. To this task he brought strong, passionate commitments which led Pares to compare him to Michelet. There were, of course, others, roped in by Pares and Seton-Watson from contacts made in their respective fields of inquiry, notably Wickham Steed, co-adjutor of Northcliffe, whose sane, balanced views of the Germans he fully shared. Most important of all was Tomáš Masaryk, then an exiled academic from the University of Prague and former leader of the Realist Party in the Reichsrath, who had been appointed lecturer in Slavonic History and Sociology at the School. He was invited to give a public lecture at King's on 'The Problem of Small Nations in the European Crisis', on 19 October 1915, at which no less a figure than the Prime Minister, Mr Asquith, undertook to take the chair. As it happened, political developments — appropriately in the Balkans — prevented him from doing so, but the occasion is conventionally taken as marking the official foundation of SSEES.

The timing was exactly right. During the opening months of the conflict Asquith had emphasized that Britain was at war, *inter alia*, to support the rights

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¹ See R. W. Seton-Watson, *Disraeli, Gladstone and the Eastern Question. A Study in Diplomacy and Party Politics*, London, 1935.

of 'small states' and to establish those rights 'on an unassailable footing'. By 'small states' he had in mind Belgium and Serbia, that is states already independent which had been attacked by the Central Powers. He was *not* advocating the rights of all small *nations* to independent statehood; he had only rejected the hitherto received doctrine that the future of small states was to be in some form of association, imperial or federal, with big ones.

Asquith's statements were liberally interpreted by spokesmen of what were known as 'the submerged nationalities' as support for their independence *tout court*. Masaryk, in his King's lecture, claimed that British policy aimed at 'the liberation and freedom of small States and Nations'. At that time it did not. However, the then unforeseen protraction of the conflict together with the bargains of alliance politics eventually redefined Asquith in Masaryk's sense: by 1918 'the rights of the small states' had become 'national self determination'. This change had crucial consequences for 'Slavonics'. In Liverpool Pares had relied on local pride and the purses of local industrialists; now the study was centred in the capital and was a matter for government, whose initial grant ran at £2,000 a year.

So the School, which set itself up in King's College London, was not the cool embodiment of a Platonic idea. It was founded during a war to serve an alliance and unhesitatingly espoused its war aims; indeed, its two leading founders helped to define them and urge them on the government. Seton-Watson's success was amply recognized by the rulers of the new Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia (and in a rather different vein by those of Austria and Hungary!), Pares was less fortunate; the changes for which he worked were not those that Russia eventually experienced. But irrespective of the particular outcome the School was publicly identified through its founders with political ideas and policies. It was 'for' the Versailles settlements, especially in regard to the new states of Central and Eastern Europe. It could not, similarly, support the new regime in post-war Russia, but either way the School was *parti pris*. This situation was not new; the tradition that history should issue in politics was well established, and nowhere more so than in the cultures the School existed to study. The consequence for the School, however, was that it spent its first two decades providing the intellectual underpinning to the Peace Treaties and arguing that the *ancien regime* in Russia was not as the current regime said it was. Not all the members of the teaching staff supported this public identification, but the promotional activities of the founders imparted to the School their commitments in much the same way and in the same period as the activities of Harold Laski gave the London School of Economics and Political Science a wholly unwarranted reputation for political radicalism.

The teaching staff was highly distinguished but remained small in number. It confronted two problems; to demonstrate the new School's intellectual credentials and to establish the School institutionally in the University, which itself was going through a process of consolidation. The participation of scholars of the calibre of Norman Jepson and Baron Meyendorff made the first objective relatively easy to achieve; the second depended on the trickier resolution of the internal politics of the University.

The two problems came together over finance. Until the end of the Second World War a proportion of the School's income was contributed by

governments of the Succession States. The dangers were well understood by the University Council — not all of whose members approved of the School as such. They had, if they needed one, a cautionary example in the complex and bitter dispute over the Koraes Chair when its holder, Arnold Toynbee, took public positions at variance with the political convictions of his Greek sponsors.² Whatever the Greeks might or might not have hoped to gain initially, the governments of Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia were not buying opinion (for Seton-Watson to emulate Toynbee over the Treaty of Trianon would have required not a change of mind, but a reversal of character); the School remained vulnerable, however, to criticisms of its sources of funds, especially as Seton-Watson and Pares were indefatigable publicists and intervenors at the Foreign Office, as ready with a memorandum as with a letter to *The Times*. In reply they could argue that without such subventions the School's course offerings would be even more restricted than they were and that foreign funding provided for growth. It was on these grounds that Seton-Watson sided with Toynbee's critics over his conduct as Koraes Professor.

The other limitation on the School's progress derived from its status in King's. Burrow's successor, Ernest Barker, did not share his predecessor's activist enthusiasms. He is not even mentioned by name in Pares's memoirs.³ Under him, Pares records, 'the outlook in King's was decidedly limited and parochial'. He and Barker tangled with one another over the possible relocation of the College, as well as over external finance. Accordingly, he manoeuvred to make the School independent, but that was not achieved until Barker himself had moved on to Cambridge. On 1 August 1932 the School became an independent institute of the University, and as such directly responsible to the Senate.

It was a notable achievement. Regional studies had not only arrived but in a university central to academic endeavour in the United Kingdom. Studies aimed to use language as a key to exploring a culture in all its diversity. The School was intellectually accredited to a part of Europe whose modern development, academically considered, had been neglected. In this connection it was the first 'institute of contemporary history', which raised eyebrows, if not doubts, among the traditionally-minded.

Ian Roberts, in the *History of the School of Slavonic and East European Studies 1915-1990*, calls its foundation 'a classic example of the linking of academic and political fields of activity'. It was. Seton-Watson's intention was that the School would eventually be part of 'a comprehensive School of Foreign Studies', training future officials and giving policy advice to governments in Britain. The intention has not been realized; British governments have not

² See Richard Clogg, *Politics and the Academy: Arnold Toynbee and the Koraes Chair*, London, 1986. Governments, of course, financed short-term visits by their own academics as lecturers.

³ See Bernard Pares, *A Wandering Student*, Syracuse, New York, 1948, chapter 8. Barker himself recalls Pares ('electrically restless') among the luminaries at King's in his time as Principal. See his memoirs: *Age and Youth*, Oxford, 1953, chapter 6. A colleague of them both at King's, John Dover Wilson, records that 'Barker ... lacked that peculiar gift which enables a man to get his way in committee without offending the people from whom he gets it'. See his *Milestones on the Dover Road*, London, 1969, pp. 114 ff.

seen the School in the same terms and, as regards advice, the emphasis, meanwhile, has shifted to strategy and to management.

Ian Roberts's treatment of the early developments is necessarily more austere than that given here. Official histories, by definition, are written within certain formal limits, and the particular limits set by the directive he was given — 'to present the history . . . within the context of [the School's] membership of the federal University of London' as well as the areas of study — make 1932 the effective starting point. It was only by that time that the University itself had taken on its present structure and therefore had established the context within which the School was to develop.

On this basis Ian Roberts presents an admirable piece of administrative history, showing how the School locks into the structure and requirements of the University, as they have changed over time, as well as participating in the progress of study of the areas to which it is intellectually accredited. He shows how, in short order, Pares reorganized the School to increase its efficiency and comply with the Senate's requirements: the Czechoslovak government offered to pay for new premises in the central area of the University; and a (first) visit by a delegation of the University Grants Committee, although critical of certain aspects of the School, at least testified to the fact that it had 'arrived'.

It did not, however, flourish. There was no flood of eager postgraduates, and senior scholars found themselves engaged in language-teaching, especially to evening students. The School was far from being the powerhouse of ideas and policy of which Seton-Watson had originally dreamed. Not for the last time in its history, individuals made a public impact, but the School itself, as an institution, little or none.

This was particularly evident in the political context of its activities. After 1933 the policies of the government in Germany appeared to put the School unequivocally on the side of the angels (after Pares's visit to the Soviet Union in 1935 the ineffable hosts included Joseph Stalin). Seton-Watson's expressions of outrage over Munich reaffirmed the public attitude towards the Peace Treaties. It was not likely to change. Pares's designated successor as Director, W.J. Rose, had been employed in Paris in 1919 by the Polish National Committee, and had continued to work in Poland for the Red Cross while reading for a doctorate at Cracow. On the day Rose became Director, German forces invaded his adopted country. During the next six years, the War brought the School's area of concern into the centre of strategic thinking and politics in Britain.

But the School, as an institution, was not able to capitalize on this change. It was ejected from its new quarters in Senate House, its personnel drafted to different wartime jobs. Thus it could make no collective impact on the direction of affairs; its primary contribution was to offer crash courses in Russian. It emerged from the conflict battered and in need of radical reconstruction, beginning with its objectives. The primary problem, of fitting a School, whose scope was by definition limited, into a structure dominated by institutions with more varied curricula and objectives, remained. Ian Roberts analyses the situation with great clarity. He also shows how government interest in Slavonic and East European studies brought the School into the first of what became successive enquiries, either into the subject area, or the

School's place in the University structure, or into the objectives and management of the School itself. Additionally, the status and purpose of the School necessarily entered the general debate about higher education in Britain. Not the least of the merits of the *History* is that it dispels the need to plough through the successive reports and to trace the relationships between them.

The Second World War solved the problem of foreign funding. The new regimes in Eastern Europe were not subtle enough to continue the support given by their predecessors;⁴ they contented themselves with denouncing 'bourgeois academics' and stripping them of any honorary distinctions their work had hitherto been deemed to merit. Even so, in Britain the affiliations, which had been tolerated if not encouraged during the War, did not at once lose their attractiveness. An application from E. H. Carr — yet another Versailles veteran — whose liberality of principle allowed him to give the Gulag the benefit of the doubt, was turned down (not on those grounds) by the Senate. Subsequently the School did appoint to its teaching staff someone who had absolutely no doubts about Stalinism at all. As the wartime alliance broke down and gave place to the Cold War, he became an embarrassment and his contract was not renewed, amid some (orchestrated?) public uproar. He moved to the Marx Memorial Library in Bethnal Green. One must stress, however, that there was no compulsive 'knee jerk' reaction on the part of the institution to the Cold War. Although, clearly, it could not share the ideas of scholarship prevailing in the Soviet Union and the countries under its influence, there was no flight into demonology.

This attitude was reinforced by the way the School came to be managed. The School was not touting for funds. On the contrary, it was conducted in such a way as to yield a surplus on its grant income, which, uniquely among academic institutions, it promptly surrendered. What might have been prudent housekeeping in other circumstances could be considered a dereliction of duty in the academy, especially at a time of expansion of higher education, and particularly in those areas which the School existed to study. The School could only welcome the increase in the number of centres of research and teaching as providing the most conclusive evidence of the soundness of the vision of the 'Founding Fathers' but it did not significantly share in the new official bounty. Government could not compel any change in management; it could only put its money elsewhere — and it did. In this respect, the growth of Soviet and East European Studies in the 1950s and 1960s amounted in effect to a vote of 'no confidence' in the School.

Ian Roberts provides all the evidence of this outcome, but without relating it to the ideas and practices of the School's internal management (which were outside his terms of reference). That in itself was highly centralized. Consultation was minimal and intermittent; committee work less than wholly rigorous because less than wholly participatory. Younger scholars on probation, understandably, did not wish to put their future at risk; the established ones, freed from administrative chores, produced work of outstanding quality, but could offer their juniors no example of wholehearted commitment to making

⁴ The Hungarian government, while legally at war with Britain, continued to pay the salary of the lector in Hungarian, through the good offices of the Swedish legation in London (see Roberts, *History*, p. 43).

policy. It is a commonplace of textbooks on management that institutions, not only in the academy but elsewhere, can get themselves into these situations, but just as companies run in this way lose touch with the outside world and pay the penalty, so the School diverged from the realities — awkward and unpleasant as some of them were — of British academic life in the 1970s and 1980s. Hitherto the School, as other British institutions, had relied on the prescriptive rights generally conceded to academic endeavour. They now came to be challenged and controverted by government. Notions that the criterion for teaching and research was that they should show ‘cost-effective’ results in the short run, and that academics who relied only on the income from their institutions could not be much good, indicted a new order, which, however condemned as philistine, was inexorable. It was also divisive. Maximizing economic opportunity might be open to lawyers and economists, for example; the consultancy market for Church Slavonic is not immediately obvious.

Ian Roberts’s account makes it very clear that the School was in a weak position to defend scholarly enquiry in the terms traditionally understood. Its peculiar management style had allowed the publication of work of high quality, but that had redounded to the prestige of the individual rather than the institution. Indeed, one of the major complaints of the academic staff to government enquiries was that the School as such failed to support the publication of research. Moreover, prescriptive rights had permitted operational inefficiencies and encouraged a less-than-optimal use of resources, professional as well as financial. All this, while not the stuff of headlines, was public knowledge in that the reports of the University Grants Committee were commented on in the Press. But, by this time, the School could no longer so easily be singled out; its shortcomings were found by governments in other areas of British academic life and were held to justify drastic reform.

In London reform was construed as rationalizing the University. This included plans to merge the School with another college, in accordance with management theory as to economies realizable through scale, and the desire of government to support big battalions in preference to ‘minority’ units. Various candidates for amalgamation were pressed on the School, including King’s College. After four fraught years the attempt was abandoned; the School’s status as an independent Senate Institute was officially confirmed. Notwithstanding this deliverance, its ratio of staff to students made the School continuously vulnerable to external criticism in the new climate of declared penury.

On both financial and institutional counts the problem fundamentally was that the School’s *raison d’être* was to promote studies, which, with the exception of the war years, *could* only attract a minority of students. The government now said it no longer had the means to pay for them. The logic of this argument — accepted by some of the teaching staff — was that subject areas on the ‘fringe’ should be abandoned, or simply reduced to the study of language. The government’s viewpoint was slightly different; such subjects were acceptable provided they involved no draft on public funds (Church Slavonic can be saved, after all!). The academy was not being singled out for such treatment. Ian Roberts pertinently recalls that such arguments were being seriously

advanced respecting British diplomatic representation overseas! Private funding, of course, raises the old problem of extraneous pressures on academic research, but by the 1980s the presuppositions had been reversed; the dominant deduction would have been that sixty years previously the Greek sponsors had been right and Toynbee wrong. Politics and the social sciences were to enjoy the kind of contractual relationships which worked so well in, for example, engineering. The School's institutional independence may have been recognized, but it still had to adapt to the new notions about the objectives of education — which altered its scope. In this connection the School is accountable no longer to a University Grants Committee, acting as a judicious barrier between a (political) donor and an (academic) recipient; it faces the Higher Education Funding Council for England, a body expressly designed to use its financial powers to bring about the configuration of the academic world in Britain which the government wants.

Internally, debates about the nature and purpose of the School did not conspicuously foster collegiality. Divisiveness, however, was not merely a function of official policy. The progress of study since the School was founded has produced a tension between the 'area' and the 'discipline'. Here, as elsewhere, specialization has meant fragmentation: 'and Sociology' in Masaryk's title indicated that he had written about suicide, not that he was expected to engage in what sociologists now have to cover. Similarly, when Pares talked about economics, he was discussing policies and their makers, not offering technical analyses. His original formula no longer functions quite as smoothly as it did. To the extent that economics, as a science, is formal and mathematical, the language requirement can be held to be minimal; to the extent that the study of the economics of Russia requires also an understanding of how Russians think and react, the need remains exactly as Pares defined it. These difficulties notwithstanding, the diversification of the curriculum has helped to strengthen the School's position. Its introduction stemmed from a new style of management, able to underpin the School's development in the drastically altered circumstances of higher education in Britain.

The future viability of the School has been vastly improved by revolutionary change in Russia and Eastern Europe. For about half its existence the School, as a centre for area studies, had largely been cut off from the area it was supposed to study. Contacts did exist, but they were formal and limited. Though from 1959 postgraduates could hone their language skills in Soviet and East European institutions, research in original and many secondary sources was out of the question. It was symptomatic that a Professor of Russian History should have to produce a history of Russia without being able to tap indigenous sources. The changes set in motion by Mikhail Gorbachev restored the possibility of access to archives and co-operatives with colleagues which Pares and Seton-Watson had taken for granted. Just as the School was making the readjustments to the situation in Britain, the area to which it was intellectually accredited reappeared. Those who had argued during the curricular debates for retaining the full panoply of studies found themselves justified by events, perhaps sooner than they had expected. The School no longer was required to justify its 'relevance' in the role of 'national resource' determined by the Higher Education Funding Council for England.

Ian Roberts analyses these changes with sympathy and insight drawn from long experience of the habits and axioms of bureaucracy. The changes he shows over seventy-five years are striking; at the outset the School was a (strange and largely unwelcome) mutation in the academy; now it is so firmly integrated in the structure of higher education and the University, respectively, that it shares the general problems which beset them in contemporary Britain. The idiosyncratic habits of Pares and Seton-Watson have given way to orthodox administrative practice. The course offerings are far more varied and the School prepares students for joint degrees in which 'Slavonics' is only one part. Ian Roberts does not suppose these processes to be at an end. One may hazard that the pressures, both financial and academic, on the institution may produce further changes, even perhaps a redefinition of its role, but that should not affect its now firmly established identity — or the significant contribution which the *History* amply demonstrates the School can make.