
NEWS OF THE PROFESSION

HUGH SETON-WATSON, 1916–1984

The death of Professor Hugh Seton-Watson of the University of London in Washington, D.C., on December 19, 1984 at the age of 68 is a great loss to the scholarly world, especially to Russian and East European studies. A man of extraordinary intellectual and linguistic gifts, he used the opportunities provided by his remarkable family and education to pursue a highly distinguished and productive career as scholar and teacher.

George Hugh Nicholas Seton-Watson was born in London on February 15, 1916. His formal education began in a French school, followed by Winchester and New College, Oxford, where he received First Class Honours in Modern Greats. He was the son of Professor R. W. Seton-Watson, a distinguished authority on Central and Southeastern Europe.

Hugh Seton-Watson wrote eleven full-length books whose sequence and content reveal much about the development of his interests and concerns. Beginning in 1936, and very actively after leaving Oxford in 1938, he traveled widely in Central and Southeastern Europe. He served in Romania and Yugoslavia in the early part of the war and briefly in Albania and Italy following the German invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941. He was later sent to British Headquarters in Cairo for intelligence work on the occupied areas of Western Europe.

Eastern Europe between the Wars (1945) was his first book. It was begun during the war (1942–43), completed at its end, and demonstrated an impressive knowledge, some of it from first-hand experience, of the political and social history of the turbulent interwar years.

His intelligence work in Cairo during the war enabled him to follow wartime political developments in Eastern Europe closely, and during his tenure as Fellow of University College and Praelector in Politics at Oxford (1946–52) he also undertook special assignments for *The Times* in Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and Greece between 1946 and 1948. The experience contributed much to his knowledge of the Sovietization process there so vividly described in *East European Revolution* (1950). It was an experience which also influenced the subsequent direction of his scholarly work, leading him to immerse himself in the study of Russian history and Russian and European communism.

His first book on Russia, *The Decline of Imperial Russia* (1952), appeared in the year of his appointment to the Chair of Russian history at the University of London's School of Slavonic and East European Studies. It was soon followed by *The Pattern of Communist Revolution* (1953, *From Lenin to Khrushchev* in its American edition), which was a pioneering effort to view communism as a global movement from the Bolshevik Revolution to the early 1950s.

In the years that followed Seton-Watson wrote his major contribution to Russian history, *The Russian Empire, 1801–1917* (1967). But the central focus of his work during the peak years of his career was upon nationalism and communism, including *Neither War nor Peace* (1960), *The New Imperialism* (1961), *The "Sick Heart" of Modern Europe* (1976), and his monumental *Nations and States: an Enquiry into the Origins of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism* (1977). The latter work seemed to draw upon and display his enormous erudition, his linguistic skills, and his talent for lucid comparison and analysis as no other work had done. The insights and analytic tools gained from a lifetime of study of Eastern Europe were applied to the rest of Europe and to much of the rest of the globe with illuminating results.

The last two books were *The Imperialist Revolutionaries* (1978) and *The Making of a New Europe: R. W. Seton-Watson and the Last Years of Austria-Hungary* (1980), written jointly with his brother Christopher Seton-Watson.

Seton-Watson greatly enjoyed—and did superbly—the sort of analytical history which is the substance of *Nations and States*. Yet he was bemused by the pretentious complexity and opaqueness of much contemporary social science writing. One felt that his “law of colonial ingratitude” was both fine irony and a humorous commentary on scholarly puffery.

He was also a moralist of a high order, whether drawing lessons for the contemporary West from Poland’s fate in the eighteenth century, chastising Western peoples for their “political laziness, shortsightedness, material hedonism,” or, when speaking of the Soviet leadership, referring to “the ineradicable dogmatism, the impenetrable carapace of self-righteousness which enfolds them.”

He was a tireless partisan of freedom, and a uniquely informative analyst of the few societies which had achieved it and the more numerous group that had not. Yet he was always a knowledgeable, generous and even-handed critic, whether writing of the United States, the Soviet Union, or any other country. Soviet ideological dogmatism was a frequent subject of criticism, but the Americans were also reminded of their besetting sin—*Wilsonian self-righteousness*—which found expression either in “the fallacy of the wickedness of the enemy” or that of “placing governments on a scale of democratic virtue and choosing one’s allies accordingly.” He could condemn South African apartheid and yet acknowledge that South African whites “have built up a magnificent industry and a fine civilization.” It was characteristic of him to urge that “a way has got to be found by which white Africans and black Africans . . . can live together.”

Seton-Watson had come to Washington in October 1984 as a guest scholar at the Kennan Institute in the Wilson Center. His brief description of his research project noted that “years of study of the modern history of Russia and of eastern and central Europe” had led him to concentrate on four main themes, which he described as follows:

- (a) the rise of nationalist movements, the formation of their political elites and the types of social discontent and aspirations which attracted mass support to them; and arising out of this the competition for mass support between nationalist and socialist movements, and the effect of such competition on the ideology of both;
- (b) the emergence of intelligentsias: not simply of a modern-educated cultural elite but of a section within the latter obsessed by political and social ideas and pursuing the radical reorganisation of society. How far can this be regarded as a specifically Russian phenomenon? How far is the emergence of intelligentsias due to the specific cultural traditions of a society, how far to a general predicament of new cultural elites in “developing,” artificially modernising societies?
- (c) “nationalities policy” in the Soviet Union in theory and practice;
- (d) Russian and Soviet expansionism in foreign policy.

The first two themes (“and their connection”) were the ones chosen “for long-term study, in my retirement”—clearly the focus of a major work uniquely suited to his knowledge and skill. But the study in Washington concentrated on the latter two. At the onset of his fatal illness, Seton-Watson was busily engaged in studying Soviet nationalities policy, the subject of a superb last lecture to an overflow audience in the Wilson Center library.

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