INTRODUCTION

Studies of British foreign policy during the First World War usually refer, often only in passing, to the problem of national self-determination. Behind these references lies a complex and intriguing history hitherto concealed by the inaccessibility of official records.

In 1914 the British government was not interested in national self-determination in eastern Europe. By November 1918 it was deeply involved with various eastern European subject nationalities and was committed by implication to their independence. The government was not formally committed to national self-determination, but it could not have abandoned the subject nationalities without being subjected to accusations of bad faith against which it would have had the greatest difficulty defending itself. This study attempts to explain that evolution in policy by analysing the British reaction to nationality problems in eastern Europe and to the desire of the subject nationalities for self-determination. It concentrates on policy during the war, not on the origins of any future policy. It is based primarily on the official records of the British government which have been supplemented with correspondence from private collections. Most of this evidence has never been used in a thorough analysis of this subject. It concentrates on the evolution of the government’s relations with the Poles, Czechoslovaks and Yugoslavs because they were the only eastern European nationalities to conduct, throughout the war, an extensive campaign in Britain for national self-determination. Among the émigrés they alone had meaningful relations with the government.

The available evidence obliges us to believe, and therefore this study argues, that British policy on national self-determination developed not as a result of theoretical speculation but as a result of the wartime relations between the government and the nationality organizations. These relations were based on the government’s desire to use the nationalities as weapons of war
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rather than on any interest in the principle of national self-determination. Considering it as an area of secondary importance, the government sought to use the political problems of eastern Europe to improve the Entente’s strategic position. In November 1918 the government’s stance on the issue of national self-determination was, therefore, not the product of calculations of the long-term political advantages for Britain of the reorganization of eastern Europe but instead the product of numerous decisions made to solve immediate problems in the conduct of the war.

Nationalism began to emerge as a significant political force during the French revolution contributing both to the strength and, ultimately, the destruction of the Napoleonic empire. Yet, when the statesmen of Europe met in Vienna in 1814, they rejected nationalism in an attempt to create a stable and, hence, peaceful European system based on the balance of power. This balance of power was restored after the upheavals of the Napoleonic era by the redrawning of international frontiers without regard for national claims. Thus the territorial settlement that emerged bore little resemblance to the distribution of nationalities in Europe and left national aspirations unsatisfied. In nineteenth-century Europe these unsatisfied aspirations were a constant threat to the status quo and a frequent cause of international instability because of attempts of subject nationalities to achieve unity and independence. The Congress of Vienna could restore governments and redraw frontiers, but it was powerless to prevent the national awakening that, inspired by the German example, was taking place particularly in eastern and southern Europe. In this national awakening lay the seeds of destruction of the work of the Congress because it was accompanied by a political programme, national self-determination, which challenged the legitimacy of many of the states and most of the frontiers of Europe by claiming that each nation had the right to form an independent state and determine its own form of government.

Nationalism did not destroy in one stroke the system established in Vienna, but instead eroded it over the ensuing century by a series of national revolts and wars of liberation which led to the creation of national states like Greece, Belgium, Rumania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Norway, Italy and Germany. This process confronted nineteenth-century statesmen with an unending series of problems as each national disturbance presented some of the Great powers with an opportunity to further their own interests
at the expense of others. Each nationality that succeeded in its struggle for independence did so with at least the tacit support if not open assistance of one of the Great powers. Those like the Poles and Hungarians, who lacked a powerful patron were unsuccessful. Thus almost every national struggle leading to the establishment of a new state, through the not disinterested involvement of at least one Great power, became a complex problem involving the interests of the particular nationality and those of Europe as a whole, necessitating action by all of the Great powers to adjust the European system so as to incorporate the newly emergent state in a manner which would not unduly favour one Great power and thus upset the balance of power.

Despite later claims by those interested in national self-determination, the diplomatic history of nineteenth-century Europe does not show that the British government traditionally supported peoples struggling to be free. Perhaps following Castlereagh’s principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of sovereign states and certainly looking to its own interests as a Great power, the British government generally tended to prefer the status quo, often despite the sentiments of its people, during the initial stages of any nationalist revolt. Only when that position became untenable, usually because the nationality in question had achieved de facto independence, would it support the establishment of a new state and then only to avoid the aggrandisement of another Great power. While this was not the case in the struggle for Italian unification, it was a pattern particularly evident in the Balkans where the British government traditionally identified its interests with those of the Sublime Porte rather than with its rebellious subjects, but would ultimately support the establishment of a new state if the alternative threatened to work to the advantage of Russia.

By 1914 European diplomats could look back on a century of experience in dealing with problems arising out of movements for national liberation and might have been justified in thinking that the most active period of such struggles was over. Yet in eastern Europe there were significant subject nationalities who remained within the grip of the German, Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires.

Poland had been partitioned by Russia, Austria and Prussia at the end of the eighteenth century, and despite a strong nationalist movement that led revolts in 1830 and 1863, had failed to regain its independence. The suppression of Polish nationalism was a
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common interest uniting the three empires, and as long as they remained at peace with one another they could exclude outside interference in Polish affairs, leaving little chance for a Polish state to re-emerge. The three empires, working together, could effectively thwart Polish national aspirations but they could not destroy Polish national consciousness which found a romantic expression in the poetry of Adam Mickiewicz and the novels of Henryk Sienkiewicz. Despite adversity, and perhaps because of it, the Polish national movement, although fragmented, continued to thrive after the unsuccessful revolt in 1863, and it was apparent that if an opportunity should arise to re-establish a Polish state the nationalists would take advantage of it.

In 1914 Czechoslovakia was not even a geographic expression, it existed only in the imagination of a few intellectuals. Although the Czechs and Slovaks formed a northern Slavic tier in the Habsburg monarchy they had never been united into a state unto themselves. Bohemia and Moravia, Habsburg dominions since 1527, had lost any semblance of independence after the Czech defeat at the battle of White Mountain in 1620, while Slovakia had been part of Hungary for a thousand years. By the eighteenth century both the Czechs and Slovaks had almost entirely lost any separate identity. The first symptoms of the national revival which was to halt the trend towards assimilation within Austria-Hungary can be detected at the end of the eighteenth century in the reaction to the centralist policies of Joseph II. This national revival gathered momentum during the following century as exemplified in the work of a number of intellectuals, the more notable being Joseph Dobrovský, famous for his work on Czech grammar, Joseph Jungmann, for his studies on the history of Czech literature, Jan Kollar, for his poetry glorifying the Slavic past and Paul Šafařík, for his studies on early Slavic history. The most famous figure of the Czech revival was, however, František Palacký, a historian as well as a politician, who was, if not the first, at least the first outstanding advocate of a Czechoslovak political entity. Through the study of history and philology these men gave an intellectual expression to Czech and Slovak national consciousness. The revival was accompanied throughout the century by increasing Slovak and particularly Czech political activity in the pursuit of a more equitable position within the Habsburg monarchy. Before 1914 the Czech and Slovak nationalists did not seek independence, that could not be achieved without the destruction of Austria-Hungary, a seem-
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ingly unattainable and not entirely desirable goal, but only autonomy within a federal empire which would give them equality with the Germans and Magyars. But complete independence was not unthinkable and, given sufficient frustration with their continuing failure to achieve their aims within the structure of the Habsburg monarchy and an opportunity to seek independence, they might well opt for it.

The southern tier of the Habsburg monarchy was inhabited by South Slavs, more precisely the Croats, Slovenes and Serbs, who comprised the largest and most dissatisfied Slavic element in the Empire. Like the Poles and the Czechoslovaks, the South Slavs underwent a national revival during the nineteenth century which began during their partial union in the Illyrian provinces of the Napoleonic empire. This national revival was given intellectual expression by men like Ljudevit Gaj, leader of the Croat literary revival, Valentin Vodnik, famous for his study of the history and language of the Slovenes and Vuk Karadžić, reformer of the Serbian language. Perhaps the leading figure of this cultural renaissance was Bishop Strossmayer of Djakovo, a champion of the idea of South Slav union, whose work in the establishment of educational institutions helped to promote the study of South Slav history and philology.

Although united by race and, to some extent, language, these nationalities were divided in almost every other respect. The Serbs were Orthodox and used the Cyrillic alphabet, while the Croats and Slovenes were Catholic and used the Latin alphabet. Some of the South Slavs lived in Hungary, primarily in the semi-autonomous region of Croatia-Slavonia, while others lived in various Austrian provinces like Dalmatia and Carniola or in Bosnia-Herzegovina. These historical, religious and administrative differences among the South Slavs gave rise to serious political divisions and conflicts which were often encouraged by the Imperial authorities. In 1914 many of the Serbs, particularly in Bosnia-Herzegovina, worked for the creation of a ‘Greater Serbia’, a union of all Serbs with the kingdom of Serbia to the exclusion of other South Slavs. This work involved anti-Austrian terrorism in which they were actively supported by the dominant party in Serbia, the Radicals, and its leader Nikola Pašić. Many of the Croats aspired to a ‘Greater Croatia’ either in association with Hungary or independent. Other South Slavs espoused ‘Trialism’, the creation of a South Slav unit within the Empire equal to Austria and Hungary. Despite such divisions there were those
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who, inspired by the example of the Illyrian provinces and following in the footsteps of Gaj and Strossmayer, advocated the formation of a Yugoslavia, the union of all South Slavs including those in the kingdom of Serbia. This position was supported by many of the Slavs in Austria who did not believe that the Austrians and Hungarians would ever accept the South Slavs as a third equal partner in the Empire and by many Slavs in Croatia–Slavonia alienated from the Empire by the policy of Magyarization. Many of the leading figures of the Yugoslav movement came from Dalmatia where, being exposed to Italian influence and reflecting on the history of Italian unification, they began to see in Serbia, particularly after its success in the Balkan wars, the potential Piedmont of Yugoslavia. This parallel was obvious in 1913 during the second Balkan war to Ivan Mestrović, a sculptor, Franjo Supilo, the editor of the Rijeka Novi List and Ante Trumbić, the leader of the Croat National party, all of whom later became leading figures of the Yugoslav émigré movement. At the outbreak of war in 1914 they were prepared to act against the Austro-Hungarian empire to achieve their political aims.

On 28 June 1914 in the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo a South Slav terrorist assassinated the Habsburg heir Archduke Franz Ferdinand thus setting in motion the chain of events leading to the outbreak of the First World War. The fact that the assassin was an Austrian South Slav inspired by the Yugoslav programme and that his act was a protest against the Habsburg failure to satisfy Yugoslav national aspirations makes it impossible to consider the question of the origin of the war without some reference to the problem of national self-determination. Indeed, after the outbreak of war the supporters of national self-determination in Britain claimed that the failure of the European system to satisfy national aspirations was the real cause of the conflict. For them, it followed that the application of national self-determination would create a more peaceful Europe. In contrast, their opponents, the pacifist liberals and left-wing radicals centred around the Union of Democratic Control, attributed the European conflict not to unsatisfied national aspirations but to secret diplomacy, the balance of power, the armaments race and imperial rivalry. All of these factors contributed to a tense international climate in which recurring crises were inevitable. But that was the normal state of international relations. None of them explain why this specific crisis, arising from the assassination in Sarajevo, led to war.
In 1905 the European balance of power was tilted in favour of the Triple Alliance by the temporary eclipse of Russia as a Great power following her defeat in the Russo-Japanese war. Russian weakness gave German statesmen much greater freedom of action in international affairs but it was only a temporary advantage, as the Germans themselves realized, because military reforms in Russia would enable her, by 1917, to resume her former position in the balance of power. The threat to Germany’s future position in Europe posed by the anticipated re-emergence of Russian power was increased by the danger that Germany’s only reliable ally, Austria-Hungary, would be seriously weakened, if not destroyed, by internal problems created by the subject nationalities. The major threat to Austria-Hungary appeared to be South Slav nationalism fostered by Russia’s protégé, Serbia. The long-term trends in European relations, as perceived by the statesmen of the Triple Alliance, tended to create the feeling that if the Serbian problem was to be solved it had to be done before 1917.

The German government saw the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand as an opportunity for a permanent solution to the South Slav problem. It advocated the use of force against Serbia on the pretext offered by the assassination on the assumption that an Austro-Serbian war could be localized. By the time the German government realized that it had seriously miscalculated, the crisis was out of control and war unavoidable. The essential factor in this crisis, which distinguished it from previous crises and which made a peaceful solution impossible, was the calculated risk taken by the German government at the very beginning of the crisis that Russia was not in a position, as she would be after 1917, to intervene. In essence, Germany and Austria-Hungary adopted a position from which they could not retreat but which was unacceptable to Russia and her allies. The willingness of the German government to risk war can be explained by its estimation of Russian weakness which gave it some reason to think that Russia would not intervene. The willingness to use force to solve a problem in international relations can be explained by the fact that previous German history, particularly the events of 1848 and 1870, seemed to teach the necessity of force. When the British government attributed the war to Prussian militarism, an enormous over-simplification, it was more accurate than either the exponents of national self-determination or the Union of Democratic Control. But, even if
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the problem of unsatisfied national aspirations was not the primary cause of the war, it was an irritant in the European system and a significant factor in the complex relationship of causes which led to the war. As such it could become a factor influencing the course of the war and, if the conflict lasted long enough to give rise to questions about the fundamental nature of the European system, national self-determination could itself become an issue.

In August 1914 the British government entered the war in order to prevent developments in Europe detrimental to its fundamental interests. Although discussions in the cabinet during the crisis centred on the preservation of the Great power status of France and the neutrality of Belgium, these issues were only adjuncts to the essential reason for war, the need to maintain the existing balance of power in western Europe. Neither the South Slav problem, which precipitated the original crisis, nor the general condition of eastern Europe, had any influence on the British decision to declare war.

On entering the conflict the government assumed no specific aims and showed no interest in a general territorial redistribution in eastern Europe. It seemed reasonably satisfied with the eastern European status quo and showed no desire to change it. Nevertheless it was possible in 1914 to speculate that as a result of the war there might be territorial changes in eastern Europe. If such changes involved the aggrandizement of Russia or the Central powers they could not, because of their effect on the balance of power, be viewed with indifference by the British government. But in the same respect changes in the structure of eastern Europe which did not substantially increase German or Russian power and which tended to promote stability did not appear inconsistent with British interests.

Before the July crisis the British government knew little about the subject nationalities of eastern Europe and even less about the complexity of their politics; it was not and had no reason to be interested in them. Shortly after the outbreak of hostilities, however, the government was approached by various eastern European politicians and journalists claiming to represent the subject nationalities. These émigrés were introduced into official circles and their cause actively promoted in Britain by a group of scholars and journalists, usually of liberal persuasion, who believed in national self-determination and who might be called liberal nationalists in order to distinguish them from those
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liberals, like H. A. L. Fisher and Viscount Bryce, who were sympathetic towards subject nationalities but also suspicious of nationalism because of its potential illiberal tendencies. These émigrés offered their services to the government and in return sought support for a policy of national self-determination, a policy which if thoroughly applied involved the complete restructuring of eastern Europe. Since the government was not interested in plans for a fundamental reorganization of eastern Europe, British officials reacted cautiously and non-commitally to these approaches. Nevertheless they did recognize from the very beginning that the émigrés might prove useful and for that reason maintained contact with them.

Despite their initial failure to elicit any support for their political aspirations, the émigrés were able, after establishing contact with the government, to enlighten British officials on the conditions in eastern Europe and the political complexities of the national movements. Through contacts with the émigrés and their British supporters the officials began to realize that national self-determination was an alternative to the status quo in eastern Europe which might not involve the aggrandizement of another Great power. The retention of the status quo or the thorough application of the principle of national self-determination were in a sense two extremes which encompassed a range of alternatives in that self-determination could be given to some but not others or some frontiers could be altered to make them more consistent with the distribution of nationalities while others could be left untouched. None of these alternatives appeared to be in conflict with essential British interests. The alternative which would produce the most stable system in eastern Europe was to be preferred, but even if the government had been interested in making a choice there was no way to determine which alternative it was. The exponents of various programmes could dispute endlessly the merits of their cases, but they could not prove them.

During the war the government preferred not to make a choice and thus did not support the status quo, national self-determination or any compromise between the two. While supporting none of the alternatives, it appeared prepared to accept any of them. Until a decision on eastern Europe was absolutely necessary it would await events. By avoiding a decision which might never have to be made, the government was able to avoid unnecessary commitments and to retain the maximum number of options. The inherent flexibility of this position enabled it to
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meet effectively events as they arose. The future would either make a decision unnecessary or would provide more information upon which to base government policy.

Events intervened to make it impossible for the government to follow this policy consistently. Situations arose in which the successful conduct of the war necessitated the adoption of commitments. In each case acceptance of a commitment was not based on any programme for the future of eastern Europe, but was the product of the immediate situation and was designed to facilitate military success. There were also instances in which the methods used to wage war, while not involving obligations, had unanticipated repercussions which, in a subtle and complex manner, tended to close off some of the government’s options. In other words, the government at times acted according to a necessity created by its own previous action. To some degree the methods of war, not political considerations, determined the results.

Some of these patterns are evident in the government’s relations with the nationality organizations and help to explain how the government found itself in November 1918 in a position of being uncommitted in any legal sense on the future of eastern Europe but so deeply involved with the nationality organizations that it could hardly deny some obligations to them. As the war progressed and as the needs of the Entente grew desperate, the services offered by the émigrés, which had been confidently rejected at the beginning of the war, began to appear more enticing and were accepted. Use of the émigrés and the organizations they controlled was part of a policy which emerged gradually during the war and which involved supporting any group opposed to the Central powers and willing to translate that opposition into action. This policy did not involve any acceptance of émigré political aspirations, but the co-operation which resulted from this policy led to complex relations between the government and the nationality organizations which created the context in which British policy on national self-determination developed.

While the government did not adopt a specific policy on the future of eastern Europe, many individuals in the cabinet and foreign office tended to have their own personal preferences. Many sympathized with the émigrés and preferred national self-determination. Such preferences were important in the development of British policy, but they were just some of a great number