

Chapter One

“INTERVENTION OR NON-INTERVENTION”: FOREIGN AFFAIRS IN BRITISH POLITICAL THOUGHT IN THE 1860s

The second half of the 1860s was a time of tremendous change in the history of Europe. G. M. Trevelyan considers the decade “the most formative years in history” of any between 1814 and 1914.¹ The greatest change during the period was brought by the emergence of a united Germany, and closely bound to that was the other major event, the dualistic transformation of the Habsburg empire. This was a particular period within British history as well: after the death of Prime Minister Viscount Palmerston, the policy of “non-intervention” started to become the official political line of the government. This idea had been partially accepted in the last years of the Palmerstonian era, as was demonstrated by the Schleswig-Holstein affair of 1864.² Conservatives from the opposition benches argued that the national interests of Britain do not bind her to Europe, and that the idea of maintaining the European balance of power was “founded on the obsolete traditions of an antiquated system.” This newly-fashioned theory of nonintervention was entirely different from what had been enunciated by Viscount Castlereagh and practised by George Canning and Palmerston: though Britain was to refrain from intervening in the domestic concerns of other nations, by her military and moral power she forced others to obey the same rule. The situation had changed considerably by the mid-1860s: nonintervention became manifest as an almost complete withdrawal from Continental affairs. As a French observer of the day noted, “there was a time when they interfered with everything, and they have

come round to not wishing to interfere with anything.”³ The Prussian ambassador to London, Count Albrecht von Bernstorff, reported to King Wilhelm of Prussia that the sympathies of England went to Austria, that the British put the main blame for the hostilities on Prussia. The ambassador drew the conclusion in June 1866 that the “English are completely impressionable and at the same time completely ignorant as to the real state of affairs on the Continent (...tellement impressionnable et en même temps tellement ignorant du véritable état des choses sur le Continent).”⁴

Count István Széchenyi, the great Hungarian economic and social reformer, recalled British public opinion in the 1850s as being disdainful of Austria as an oppressive power. Throughout the 1850s, subsequent British governments defied the public view, and tended to support Austria as one of the pillars in the European balance of power. This commonly accepted political doctrine was not questioned by any government officials of the period.⁵ Although the Liberal cabinet of Lord John Russell referred to the importance of the balance of power, when supporting the idea of a peace conference before the outbreak of the Austro-Prussian war, it was the cautiousness of the British government which ultimately doomed the peace conference to failure: Her Majesty’s Government proclaimed neutrality during the ensuing war. British diplomacy was so reluctant to become involved in the problems of German Europe that the British ambassador in Vienna, Lord Bloomfield left Vienna at the end of September 1866 for “a leave of absence” of several months, to be interpreted by the Prussian Minister Carl Anton Philipp Freimerr von Werther as a sign that Bloomfield “felt to have been under pressure in a passive role forced on him by the current policy of his government to stay away from intrusion into Continental questions; and leaving him with the task of mere observation of the events during the war crisis and the peace negotiations.”⁶

The Conservative government of the Earl of Derby was equally cautious when it attempted to make a distinction between theory and practice, stating “though not wishing to adopt nonintervention in an absolute manner, we would yet abstain from armed intervention.”⁷ The return to power of the Liberals in 1868 produced no changes in views on foreign policy, a point made emphatically by the government of William Ewart Gladstone and George Granville.⁸ This continued as the

prevailing attitude in the years to come, though it was the queen herself who warned the Earl of Clarendon in 1869: “If it were to be generally understood that we could not any longer be relied upon, except for moral support, England would soon lose her position in Europe.”⁹ Despite the queen’s warning, the theory of maintaining the balance of power in Europe was labeled an “obsolete tradition” in the House of Commons of the late 1860s, and the new policy was given its legal expression in March 1868 when Parliament deleted from the Mutiny Bill “that traditional phrase which stated, as one of the reasons for the existence of a British army, the necessity of preserving the balance of power of Europe.” Bismarck liked to complain that he lost five years of his political career believing that Britain was still a great power, R. B. D. Morier reported on April 1, 1874.¹⁰

The causes that led to this change in British political attitudes are manifold. Apart from changes in the international scene it was very much the economic boom along with the energetic steps taken to expand the British Empire that induced political leaders to remain aloof from continental politics.¹¹ Count Rudolf Apponyi, Austrian ambassador to London, saw the withdrawal and complete passivity of the British government as due to internal problems of the country, although Britain was rich and prospering.¹² However, even the economic boom did not make up for the loss in prestige once enjoyed around the world. Contemporary journalists immediately realized dangers in the new situation and attributed them to several factors. “Our press has much to answer for in this respect; so have our middle classes in their love of wealth and comfort; so have our upper classes in their dislike and dread of all earnestness and enthusiasm.”¹³ A considerable number of responsible statesmen, serious journalists, and political commentators felt compelled to sound a warning signal. Palmerston was still alive and active when a contributor to *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* wrote a vigorous attack on the new direction in foreign affairs, identifying Foreign Secretary Lord John Russell as responsible for Britain’s loss of international prestige.¹⁴ Some felt justified in considering the international reputation of the country to be dependent on the statesmanship of one particular person, especially as the principle of political omnipotence seemed appropriate during a period of intricate party struggles. Thus, certain political interests made the maintenance of such illusions

imperative. Journalists with a broader view, however, came to more general conclusions. As W. R. Greg pointed out a few months later in *Fraser's Magazine*, Britain had done her "special work" in Europe: nearly every nation now had a parliament and a constitution. By announcing the policy of nonintervention, her fight for the protection of weaker nations against oppressive rulers had come to an end. It was due to this change, the author remarked, that England was "less feared and less trusted" than earlier and had lost much respect. Accordingly, he advised the country to "retire from the post of especial or joint European arbitress." The economic, military and naval power of the country was "no longer unapproachably supreme," as it had been fifty or sixty years ago, and thus the relative position of the country in relation to other European powers had changed. Greg therefore raised the question as to whether the interference of the country in continental affairs was any longer needed, and whether, if needed, it could be rendered effectively. The conclusion of the article suggested that the real field of activity for British politics had to be looked for in Asia for it was there that economic and even moral success could be hoped for.¹⁵

The anonymous author of a study analyzing the Prussian victory of 1866 took a different view. He called upon the British sovereign to "restore this country to the position from which she has fallen, and to see that our policy of "non-intervention" does not confer upon us an isolation which will lead Continental rulers to believe that they can act as they please, regardless of our opinion."¹⁶

The discussion of foreign affairs centered mostly on the principle of "intervention or nonintervention," or more particularly, around the problems obscured by this formula. As James Joll pointed out, this debate on the problems of British foreign policy was to continue with interruptions for several decades, and the conflict was often not based upon traditional differences in party loyalty.¹⁷ In her recent book on Richard Cobden, Wendy Hinde suggested that it was after the Crimean War that the British public lost its taste for intervening in other people's affairs and that the trend was accelerated after the Schleswig-Holstein affair.¹⁸ By the mid-1860s the question became such a burning issue that A. G. Stapleton devoted a whole volume to it in 1866. Even the title, *Intervention and Non-Intervention, or the Foreign Policy of Great Britain from 1790 to 1865*, indicated that it was British foreign policy in its

entirety, which was to be considered under the formula of “intervention or nonintervention.” Stapleton considered the political and international-legal aspects of intervention and nonintervention from the French Revolution onwards to the Crimean War on four different continents. He spoke unfavorably of the official standpoint taken by Britain during the Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence. The book represented the internal echo to the growing coarseness of the methods employed by British imperialism and was seen at the same time as a daring criticism of English politics. His final conclusion is very close to that of W. R. Greg: he was “puzzled by the remarkable phenomenon,” that “Great Britain is no longer honoured and trusted as she was—her statesmen having lost that moral influence which...serves to restrain unscrupulous Governments....”¹⁹ It is perhaps not without interest that contemporary reviewers found this idea especially noteworthy when discussing the book.²⁰

Responsible members of Parliament and the press alike frequently discussed the dangers and advantages of this new interpretation of the doctrine of nonintervention. In the great debate on foreign policy in May 1866, Earl Grey called the attention of his fellow MPs to the fact that

in former times...no man ever dreamt that the principle on non-intervention applied to the case of the disputes which arise in the civilized world, or that it meant that a great country like this had no duty to perform in endeavouring to prevent the oppression of weak States by the strong, and in maintaining, not only peace, but the interests of justice throughout the world.²¹

St. Paul's Magazine, with a circulation of some twenty thousand copies, published a study on “England’s Place in Europe,” and suggested, “in the present unsettled state of Europe...the attitude of...watchfulness, observation, and expectancy.” Nevertheless, even this magazine considered it dangerous to make nonintervention in Continental matters the basic principle of British foreign policy and strongly advised the government not to let England be reduced to the condition of a powerless nation.

...Her influence and strength will hereafter be most felt and will be best used if we abstain, as much as possible, from interference in the quarrels and concerns of other nations....The interference and

intervention of England in Continental affairs is less necessary or desirable now than it was previous to the great political changes, which have recently occurred in Europe....²²

If we consider the great changes in the economic, social and political structure of the country at the time of the Second Parliamentary Reform, the passivity of British foreign policy becomes much more understandable. This passive attitude was the cause and, at the same time, the consequence of a lack of interest in foreign affairs and, occasionally, of a complete ignorance in these matters.²³ Stapleton complained at several points in his book that “the great majority of the people of this country, unconscious of its real position, do not care for foreign policy; and it is generally difficult, and sometimes impossible, to rouse them to a sense of its importance.”²⁴ The *Times* was equally desolate. “There has hardly ever been a time”—it grumbled on March 20, 1866—“in which the people of this country have paid so little attention to the affairs of the Continent as during the last two years.”²⁵

It must be noted, however, that the attention of a considerable section of the public was absorbed by the growing importance of the empire and the emerging problems of the colonial system. According to one of the best critics of contemporary Britain, Karl Marx, the ignorance shown by the British middle classes in matters of foreign policy was due to two reasons:

In the first place, since the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the aristocracy has always enjoyed the exclusive right to conduct the foreign affairs of England. Secondly, the evolution of the process of the distribution of labor has, to a certain extent, lowered the intellectual standards of the bourgeoisie, for it has concentrated all their energies and mental powers on the narrow spheres of their mercantile, industrial and professional interests. Thus a situation has developed in which the aristocracy acted on behalf of the bourgeoisie in all their foreign or international interests, and the press does their thinking for them.²⁶

Certain sections of the British public went even so far as to consider international events a spectacle, and they differed only on whether

the play was a comedy or a tragedy.²⁷ This was quite a remarkable situation, especially if we take into consideration the dozens of serious journals, reviews, and magazines that tried to arouse some interest in the great international questions of the day.²⁸ Oxford professors attempted a scholarly analysis of the foreign relations of England. Although such a positivist approach could never become popular as it criticized the British too sharply, it was, nevertheless, a sign of the desire to define anew the international position, the political “mission” of Britain.²⁹ Public opinion might have been aware that the responsibility for Europe had always been too heavy a burden for the country, but there was always a section of society ready to point out the dangers of a potential withdrawal from Continental matters: sooner or later it might mean the necessity of resigning from the position of a world power.³⁰

INTEREST IN THE HABSBURG MONARCHY

Withdrawal from an active involvement in Continental problems did not, of course, mean that Britain had no interest in the major political issues of the period. On the contrary: expressing her opinion in matters of European significance was something that England was very willing to do.

As far as the Habsburg empire was concerned, C. A. Macartney rightly pointed out that

...Britain...consistently...support[ed] the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, although there was much also in the structure of the Monarchy which British progressives disliked. In 1848 there was strong popular feeling among us against the Austrian regime, and very lively sympathy for Hungary, and our Foreign Secretary, Lord Palmerston, fully shared both feelings, but while willing, as he said, to do everything possible for the Hungarians, he refused to do anything for Hungary,

because he held that Austria without Hungary would be too weak to play her role in Europe. “For the same reasons, Britain hesitated long

in the First World War (as did France and the U.S.A.) before consenting to a policy which aimed at the break-up of Austria-Hungary, and only agreed to that policy in the Spring of 1918...."³¹

Indeed it was during the Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence of 1848–49 that British attitudes first played an important role in the history Hungary. Several historians have discussed the contradictions inherent in the British attitudes of the time, along with the ambiguous nature of Palmerston's foreign policy.³² In and after 1848, the British government was more or less of the opinion that Austria and Hungary should reach some kind of compromise with each other as British interests would only be furthered by the preservation of a firm and unified empire in Central Europe. According to a new view gaining support in the early 1860s, the political system in Central Europe could best be consolidated by Austria establishing political links with Hungary. Thus the urgency of a compromise with the Hungarians became a weapon in the armory of British diplomacy in order to ensure the stability of the Habsburg empire; at the same time, the desire to improve relations with Hungary reflected sympathy felt throughout Britain for the cause of the Hungarians.³³

After the Italian Campaign, the Hungarian question again features in British political pronouncements. Although the British foreign secretary, Lord John Russell, described in February 1860 the settlement of the Hungarian Question as Austria's internal affair, the fact that Britain was deeply concerned with the problem is shown by an appeal made by Lord Palmerston in the same year to the Austrian government, warning them that only a compromise with the Hungarians could secure the consolidation of the country. A year later Palmerston himself described the settlement of the Hungarian Question as the *sine qua non* of Austria's peaceful development. In parliamentary speeches (April-May 1861), Lord Russell emphasized the necessity of reaching a compromise, using a tone of support for Austrian interests and opposition to Hungarian independence. Not much later Palmerston refused to be drawn into the conflicts within the empire, but nevertheless underscored his view of the importance of maintaining the Austrian Empire as a great power in the center of Europe, saying that it would be of immense misfortune to Europe if some inner shock contributed to the dissolution of the empire. Palmerston did not even consider the Hungarians capable of forming an

independent state, and in recognizing Hungary as a part of the Austrian Empire did no more than stick to his 1848–49 viewpoint.³⁴

This may account for the unanimous support the British government, regardless of party affiliation, gave to the emerging Austro-Hungarian Compromise. The Compromise would have been part of a wider movement towards European stabilization, and a settled Austrian Empire was seen in British financial quarters as a more reliable trading partner. The Compromise was looked upon by the British as the only salutary step possible, as far as the monarchy’s position in Europe, Anglo-Austrian relations, and the internal development of the empire were concerned. The Compromise, as seen from London, went a long way towards bringing stability to a troubled region.³⁵

British politics was concerned about settling the problems of smaller nations as well, but the interest of the general public was aroused only by revolutionary activity of the major powers. Francis William Newman was accurate when stating in a private letter that

the English Radicals understand nothing of foreign hearts, except when there is movement, & war or threats of war. While things are outwardly quiet, they, with our whole mercantile world, will swallow any such fiction, as, that other nations have not our passions, our pride, & our fears. By such fictions the “Times” successfully works upon England.³⁶

Contemporary remarks on Anglo-Hungarian matters tell us how short the memory of the collective mind was. “...The Hungarian zealots of 1849 have taken up new loves in place of what was a well-paying cry at the time,” complained Joshua Toulmin-Smith, one of the most enthusiastic supporters of Kossuth’s cause in England;³⁷ this impression seems to represent England’s flagging interest in continental matters. The smaller states of Eastern Europe had been stowed away in the “lumber room of the brain” of the British people, a perspective epitomized by what Leslie Stephen wrote about Transylvania: “various geographical terms, which had had some hazy meaning at school, but which had long ceased to hold any definite position.”³⁸

Observers of the period provided different explanations for this lack of interest. According to the Austrian ambassador in London,

American matters “absorbed” the attention of the British government and public.³⁹ An old admirer of Kossuth in Glasgow claimed that “his cause [was] under a cloud” and his memory was no longer “green.” During the summer of 1866 he complained of the complete lack of interest in Hungarian matters in Scotland and in the north of England. John McAdam, from whose letters the above remarks are taken, considered these phenomena to be the consequence of Kossuth’s withdrawal from active political life. “Hungary to the general public is almost as a thing of the past,” he observed in a letter dated February 1867.⁴⁰ The Austro-Hungarian Compromise coincided almost exactly with the parliamentary reform movement in Britain and thus, as an attaché of the Austrian Embassy in London, Ernst von Plener noted in a letter dated March 1867, “there is practically nothing else spoken about here than the reform-issues. Englishmen have lost now all their interest in foreign policy.”⁴¹

The sources, however, are not quite unanimous. Those complaining of complete passivity proved to be too pessimistic: along with what has been presented above we may find signs of a growing interest in Austria from 1865 onwards. “...It cannot be indifferent,” says Charles Boner, author of *Transylvania*, one of the most popular travel books on the region, “whether or not we judge fairly the acts, and character, and political development of an ally, or a people who may become so.”⁴² It was also not just by chance that contemporary English reviewers devoted particular attention to his book, as “at this moment, when Austria is endeavouring to settle the much vexed question of Hungarian politics, any information relative to the country of the Magyars will be received with interest and attention.”⁴³ It is now obvious that the new phase in Austro-Hungarian politics attracted the interest of some sectors of the British public.⁴⁴ The emergence of this new interest was demonstrated by the fact that several papers published articles on their front pages on matters connected with Hungary,⁴⁵ and even a paper beyond the political realm, like the *Anthropological Review*, asked the distinguished linguist R. S. Charnock to write an article “On the language of the Magyars.”⁴⁶

The Austro-Prussian War in the summer of 1866 showed that there was at least one European event capable of capturing the attention of the British public.⁴⁷ Colonel Edward Bruce Hamley of the Royal Artillery, professor of military history, strategy and tactics at the

Staff College,⁴⁸ admitted some surprise when he stated in August 1866 how enthusiastic the general public was in the events of the war:

It has come to pass that the great body of the public is much less commercial or political in its tastes than military. It has suddenly come to be composed of strategists. Bank panics and Reform Bills recently commanded a good deal of interest, but everybody who reads the newspapers, and adds his voice to swell the great chorus of public opinion, is ready to discuss the failure of Benedek, and the successful marches of the Prussians.⁴⁹

Press and publishers suddenly now worked to meet the demand of the public. The war was given the widest coverage in the news columns of the dailies;⁵⁰ British periodicals discussed frequently and at length both the military and political aspects of the war, and the book trade moved in to exploit the considerable interest shown in the war. The number and quality of books and articles published can measure the extent of this interest. It must be noted, however, that some journalists were still not entirely satisfied with the interest their fellow countrymen took in the political transformation of the continent.⁵¹

The recommencement and successful termination of the official talks on the Austro-Hungarian Compromise, and the establishment of the dualistic system of government both aroused interest in Austria and Hungary, although the question of primary importance for Britain, the problem of German unification, was by that time almost completely solved. On the occasion of the coronation of Francis Joseph in 1867, the *Times* warned the people of England that they might fancy not having any interest in this “representation of a great drama,” but in the system of “close alliances and international relations of the day the condition of every European State is becoming of greater importance... and the well-being and contentment of the populations become identified with the preservation of the general peace.”⁵²

When examining the sources of the period, however, we come across many references complaining not of a lack of interest but rather a lack of knowledge concerning Austria and Hungary. There are, for example, a number of statements of this sort in the voluminous description of Hungary made by Arthur J. Patterson.

To most of us the Hungarians are merely unfamiliar names, misspelt in Mr. Reuter's telegrams. To others, again, the word "Magyar" calls up recollections of the diamonds of Prince Eszterházy, or the revolutionary eloquence of M. Kossuth; neither of them personages from whom a true idea of the average Hungarian could be formed.

Elsewhere he writes: "The ideas entertained by many Englishmen about Hungary may be comprehensively summed up in the epithets 'mediaeval,' 'chivalrous' and 'oriental.'"⁵³ Even if it had a positive tinge, the image of Hungary was built upon a number of somewhat distorted elements. An article by Henry Ecroyd, for example, with its odd explanation of the meaning of the word "Magyar," shows a completely false image both of Hungarian politics and of society. "When we use the word 'Magyar,' let us remind our readers, that the word means simply 'Hungarian,' although it has been too frequently used, since 1848, to signify 'noble,' and has also been appropriated by the part of Kossuth to signify one of that agitator's especial followers."⁵⁴

Some reasons for that monumental ignorance have already been mentioned. Let us add that there were no guidebooks published in English on this region and thus the books of Patterson and Mrs. Byrne also functioned as guides.⁵⁵ Both Edward Dicey and Mrs. Byrne complained of the lack of a suitable guidebook: a state of affairs underlined by the fact that the once popular work of Miss Julia Pardoe on the Hungary of 1839–40 was still in use in 1867.⁵⁶ Not only were there few works of a general nature, but it was also difficult to find writings on the political problems and internal situation of the Austrian Empire. A pamphlet published in 1866 immediately after the Austro-Prussian War states: "We were in reality ignorant of her true condition, of her necessities, of her difficult and peculiar position towards her various peoples, and of her real motives which guided her." Another author also complained of the troubles he encountered in acquiring necessary information.⁵⁷ Usually well-informed in European politics, M. E. Grant Duff asked in the House of Commons in 1869: "What statesman inside or outside the Empire knows anything at all of the facts of Austria? It is a science in itself, maybe, it is half a dozen sciences."⁵⁸

The Austrian government tried to exploit this information gap. Indeed, it did so successfully, for the pamphlet of F. L. Weinmann, the

first propaganda of the newly established Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, was remarkably well received by contemporary critics:

To statesmen all information is welcome respecting a potential makeweight in the balance of power...—the British nation sympathizes in the welfare of its most ancient, most faithful, and unswerving ally. Yet we are very imperfectly acquainted with the present condition of these colligated countries.⁵⁹

According to the *Imperial Review*, the indifference to the subject was probably due to difficulties in obtaining clear-cut information relative to the internal transformation of the country. This is why “few people have more than the most elementary ideas...of the various phases of constitutional life, through which she has passed during late years.”⁶⁰ Apart from the lack of reliable information, a widespread distortion was greatly responsible for some lack of knowledge: a journey to Hungary was commonly believed to be fraught with difficulties.⁶¹ Language barriers also contributed to the problem, and ironically, according to Arminius [Ármin] Vámbéry, the relative proximity of the country to Britain led to a lack of interest as well.⁶²

Paradoxical though it might sound, these very factors suggest that military and political events aroused the interest of much wider strata in the internal affairs of the Habsburg empire.⁶³ That is why the lack of suitable information was so frequently cited—and then remedied—by a number of comparatively sound articles and books dealing with questions pertinent to the Monarchy and Hungary’s role in it, published after the Austro-Prussian War, and especially after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise. A number of journalists pointed out that the publication of this literature was made not only in the commercial interests of certain periodicals, but also to meet the demand of the public.⁶⁴ Arthur J. Patterson, who translated Mór Jókai’s *Az új földesúr* as *The New Landlord* into English, referred to public interest in things Hungarian when offering the work of Jókai to British readers. “Of late years,” he wrote in the Preface of the English version, “the attention of the English public has been several times called to Hungary and the Hungarians. Hence the following picture of Hungarian life, by one of themselves, may not be without interest for English readers.”⁶⁵

Although journalistic output increased during the epoch under survey, and although there are a few references to increasing preoccupation with the subject, the Hungarian question, as testified by the quantity of source material, aroused far less interest than other international problems of the period, and was focused primarily on those matters in which British interests were directly involved. This can be explained by the insular nature of British society and the colonial orientation of British foreign policy as well as by the quantity and quality of news coming from Central Europe. Ebbing public interest may be partly accounted for by the relatively small number of channels through which British society could gather information on Austria and Hungary, and this in turn may explain the fragmentary, mosaic quality of Austria-Hungary's image in British eyes.