

Rummaging through History: 1851 – an Empire strikes back!

*CIB chairman **Edward Spalton** discovers an old copy of Punch from 1851 in his loft, and reflects on how many of the themes of mid-nineteenth century European geopolitics are still with us today, more than 150 years later.*

A few years back I tidied out the loft. Among the ancient tennis rackets – each heavy enough to require a Hercules to wield it – wicker picnic baskets and crumbling cardboard boxes mostly full of other cardboard boxes, were some old copies of *Punch*.

Issue No 503 of 1 March 1851 contained an article (reproduced below) lampooning critics of the then Foreign Secretary, Viscount Palmerston. *Punch* was quite a radical rag in those days. Satire was not invented in the 1960s!

At the time of its writing, 'Austria' included great swathes of central and Eastern Europe, as well as parts of Italy. It was also the leading power of the German Confederation, but beginning to feel the pressure of a rising Prussia. After the abortive revolutions of 1848, a period of repression had set in. Lord Palmerston had followed a policy of encouraging constitutional reforms, provoking Metternich, the Imperial Austrian Chancellor, to compose the doggerel:

*Hat der Teufel einen Sohn,
a son,*

*So ist er sicher Palmerston.
be Palmerston.*

If the Devil has

It surely must

Many of the themes in this article are still with us today, albeit in different guises. There is the clash of ideas between European unity and order on the one hand, versus democracy and liberty on the other. The notion of Italy being 'rolled finally into the great German sausage' would no doubt strike a chord with many Italians today, suffering under the yoke of a single currency that prioritises German economic ideas and interests. Palmerston's prototype 'liberal interventionism', which saw him cast somewhat as a would-be liberator of Europe, invites comparisons with Blair's interventionist 'ethical' foreign policy – albeit Palmerston did not resort to dodgy dossiers. And of course, the Emperor referred to in the article is the very same Emperor Franz Josef whose impossible ultimatum to Serbia touched off the Great War of 1914-18, which not only ensured his own empire's destruction, but gave birth to supranationalist ideas for creating a 'United States of Europe'.

HURRAH FOR AUSTRIA!

Punch, No. 503 (1 March 1851)

Now that the Sclavonian and Italian provinces of Austria have joined the German Confederation, sauerkraut may be said to have taken root over the greater portion of Europe: and the friends of the cause of order in this country may have reason to rejoice in their assault on LORD PALMERSTON last year. After all, what is there so wholesome, so much needed for Europe now, as quiet? And is not this the best way of securing it?

For instance, suppose it is found necessary to flog some refractory MADAME DE MADERSBACH on the Danube, a regiment from Coburg may be sent to do the business, and the Austrians be employed elsewhere. Suppose the Emperor (God save him!) wants to shut up a newspaper office in Vienna,

he may march a Milanese detachment into the city, who will perform the job. Suppose the Holy Father is uneasy, and in fear of his own subjects, a Lutheran garrison from Berlin may maintain order in his capital and a High Dutch-aesthetic-mystific-Prussian force accompany the religious processions and keep guard at St. Peter's.

Suppose – for such things are possible still – suppose, in spite of the paternal government of the KING OF NAPLES (Heaven bless his Majesty and reward him!) – another rebellion were to break out in his country – like that, shall we say, in Hesse the other day? The tranquillity of Naples is necessary for the tranquillity of the Roman states and of the Austrian possession in Italy; the Austrian possessions form part of the Great German Confederation. Forwards, Hanover and Brunswick! We march you into Naples to mount guard over Italian rebels IN CHAINS AND SOLITARY CONFINEMENT FOR LIFE, and to back up the spies of CARRETTO.

And we have done this – or helped to do it – and chuckled over our prudence as Conservative statesmen. Confound that PALMERSTON – that brouillon, the cause of half the mischief of Europe! We have stopped his meddling at any rate!

Yes, and we have seen the noble Hungarian sink, without a hand to help him: we have seen the Hessians with the best cause, the honestest cause, the cause of every lover of peace and law, handed over to Bavarian courts martial – and never said a word; we have seen twenty thousand men rotting in Neapolitan dungeons, and we read that forty thousand Austrians are on the Sardinian frontier, because the Emperor is disquieted by the encouragement given to liberalism in Savoy.

O how unselfish we English are! How generous, gallant and wise! How we trounce a Minister who meddles with other folks' affairs. Let us get over a Neapolitan gentleman,

manacled and put into solitary confinement and put him in the Crystal Exhibition. His tortures will be profitable to us; it will be amusing to see the lonely wretch caught in the trap and served right. So Italy and Hungary are chopped up, and rolled finally into the great German sausage.

Today the continuing influence of the House of Habsburg is rather more than the Cheshire Cat's grin. The late Otto von Habsburg, son of Karl the last Emperor, was prominent in the clamour for the destruction of Yugoslavia twenty years ago – a process assisted by the secret services of Germany, Austria, Hungary and the Vatican as well as the armed forces of the USA and NATO.

Like his now beatified father Karl and his late Imperial and Royal Majesty Franz Josef before him, he was enthusiastic for the bombardment of Belgrade – a case of malice aforethought long matured if ever there was one. The ultimatum presented to Yugoslavia at Rambouillet in 1999 was even more impossible for any country to accept than the Imperial Austrian ultimatum of 1914. We have it on the authority of his wife that the Imperial Austrian Foreign Minister Berchthold spent a sleepless night inserting extra clauses because he feared Serbia might agree to the terms and deny Austria her war – rather like Madeleine Albright in more recent years.

The late Dr von Habsburg, as he was usually styled, was leader of Pan Europa and a German member of the European Parliament until 1999. He was quoted in *Le Figaro* of 15 August 1991 as saying:

'Croats, being the civilised part of Europe, have nothing in common with Serbian primitivism the Balkans. Croatia's future lies in a European Confederation to which the former Austro-Hungary could serve as the model to be followed.'

The 'Sclavonia' of the *Punch* article is part of Croatia, now

cleansed of most of its Serb population so that an ethnically and religiously pure Croatia became a fit candidate for EU membership.

To quote from a foreign policy conference report of 1995:

'In the period leading up to the Croatian secession (from Yugoslavia) there were signs that indicated the re-emergence of the historical axis previously seen in the days of the Holy Roman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Third Reich. There is no "conspiracy theory" in this: merely the reappearance of a geopolitical pattern... Germany was striving to bring about the break-up of Yugoslavia in pursuit of its own strategic objectives, and at the same time positioning itself alongside the United States. In this Germany was aided by Austria.'

Adventurism by the Noble House of Austria in the Balkans cost millions of lives in the Great War. There is no guarantee that the Western intervention of the Nineties will have any happier long-term outcome than Austria's annexation of Bosnia Herzegovina in 1908.

What we can be certain of is that the geopolitical interests of the old Central Powers today are not those of Britain. I am sure my *Punch*-subscribing ancestor would have agreed. Perhaps he would also have sympathy today with those peoples of Europe who are chafing at the overlordship of the EU and would like to be unrolled from 'the great German sausage' – Italy and the Visegrad countries of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Almost certainly, he would have a jaundiced view of the EU's present plans for expansion in the Western Balkans.