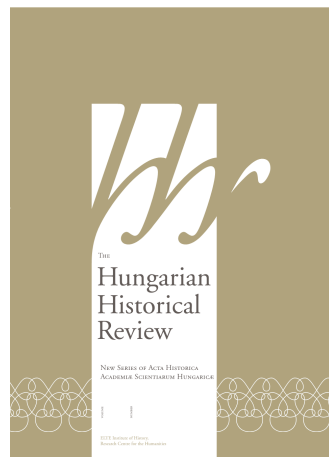


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Embers of Empire: Continuity and Rupture in the Habsburg Successor States after 1918. Edited by Paul Miller and Claire Morelon. New York–Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2018. 366 pp.

The disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire has been characterized in national historiographies as a sort of “zero hour” and total triumph for the newly emerged or enlarged nation states in Central Europe. This volume focuses, in contrast, on the question of what survived this great rupture. As Morelon underlines in her introduction, attention is given to the afterlife of the Empire and its successor states. Her considerations are based on Pieter Judson’s observation that “nation and empire were not binary opposites in the context of the Habsburg Monarchy, and [...] the regime’s collapse in 1918 was due to the state’s transformation under the pressures of war conditions rather than any internal nationalist tensions.” The Empire’s institutions, thus, should be understood as institutions which functioned relatively efficiently and successfully up to their official end. The research in this volume is based on local case studies and the examination of different institutional “pillars” of the Empire. This perspective allows the book to go beyond the still dominant paradigms of the nationally biased narratives (without negating them) and also to take a step back from the “Habsburg Myth” in the spirit of Claudio Magris and what later generations made of his concept, occasionally tempted to blur “the line between analyzing the myth and actually sustaining it.” The editors obviously know about the current state of research (ghost borders, concepts of loyalty, history of institutions, etc.), but they do not waste too much time on questions of theory, as the central concepts of “transformation” and “transition” are neither defined nor even delimited from each other.

The first of four parts explores the grassroots level in order to examine “the transition in local contexts across the region” with a focus on processes of coping with contingency. Gábor Egry’s instructive chapter compares two former territories of the Hungarian crown: Slovakia and Transylvania, both regions with large ethnic and religious minorities. He bases his survey on the assumption that in the transformation process, local societies and individuals were confronted with a set of tasks which previously had been undertaken by the state. National demarcation became less important in such moments. Subsequently, Egry asks “how the different regions expressed themselves politically and socially in this early state-building period.” In order to arrive at possible answers to this question, one should consider whether “the region” isn’t rather the product of

a “patchwork of local transitions” and therefore another constructed identity to be positioned, eventually, against the centralizing powers. Co-editor Claire Morelon’s study on interwar Prague shifts the focus from the periphery to the center. Morelon explores different approaches to the interpretation of regime change in the capital city of Czechoslovakia. She describes the difficult process of national self-discovery and self-organization, which led to “a very high level of distrust” of the new administration among the population. As a result, the disappointment, which rapidly followed the national triumph, provided a basis for the crises of the 1930s. Iryna Vushko presents the biography of the Polish-Austrian, Galician born politician Leon Biliński, who held the position of Minister of Finance in imperial Austria and in “New Poland.” As a member of an established expert elite, he was needed in the new national state in order to help form the new administration, while as a “Kakanian” he remained “suspect of national defiance,” especially for Polish nationalists, who accused him of favoring the Empire and never fully endorsing the Polish Republic. Marta Filipová presents a comparison of different major exhibitions before and after 1918 in Austria-Hungary and then Czechoslovakia in the period between 1873 and 1928. She finds it problematic that, before the fall of the Empire, Czechs, Romanians, Hungarians, Slovaks, and Moravians were predominantly depicted as peasants in contrast to the “more developed” Germans, depictions which implied different levels of civilization among the inhabitants of the Empire. While this form of inner colonialism seems to have been overcome after 1918, Filipová finds some parallels between the particular strategies of representing the state: e.g. the metaphor of “a bridge between the East and the West” was used at the *Weltausstellung* of 1873 in Vienna and at the Brünner Expo in 1928. Nevertheless, we need to question whether such strategies of both internal and external representation, which can perhaps be found at nearly every place at any time and which do not feature specific aspects of the concrete transformation process, should be researched in this volume.

The second part of the volume, dedicated to the Habsburg Army, is introduced by Richard Bassett’s “Reflections on the Legacy of the Imperial and Royal army in the successor states.” His essay provides a rough and eloquent though erratic biographical tour through the history of the Habsburg Army and its aftermath until the 1940s. More or less expedient forays lead from the seventeenth century to the present. Hardly a single German word is spelled correctly (for instance on a single page, page 129, one finds “Austrian Bundeswehr,” in “grossen Stil,” and “Scharfes Befehl”). Irina Marin’s chapter

on the “K. (u.) k. Officers of Romanian Nationality before and after the Great War” is, in contrast, source-based and analytically instructive. She states that loyalty was an important factor for Habsburg’s Romanian soldiers. There was no contradiction between national awareness and imperial allegiance. The Romanian officers went on to live these values after 1918, even within the new national setting of “Greater Romania.” John Paul Newman demonstrates the reverse side of such an attitude by dedicating his survey to the afterlife of the Austrian-Hungarian Army in Croatia. Many members of the army lost everything with the collapse of the Empire, and their identification with the new south Slavic state was weak. This generated tensions between a humiliated minority “culture of defeat,” which was “isolated, marginalized, but nevertheless present in the successor states,” and larger “cultures of victory.” The “defeated” regained their historical “meaning” with the emergence of the radical right: within the Ustaša movement, they experienced a “remobilization.”

The third part of the book is dedicated to further “pillars” of the Empire: Church, dynasty, and aristocracy. First, Michael Carter-Sinclair explores the role of the Catholic Church in the Austrian transformation process into a democratic republic. In this context, the connection with Rome as the heart of the Catholic world constitutes an interesting, unique layer of loyalty in the interwar setting. While the Catholic Church in Austria was pragmatic with regards to the new political circumstances and even participated personally in the politics of the republic, it changed its attitude in 1927 and displayed “its true antidemocratic colors by sanctifying the overthrow of the Austrian Republic.” The comparison with similar situations in other European states of the era helps situate the Austrian development in the international sphere. Nevertheless, a brief glance at other ideologically driven actors and institutions would have been useful to classify the Catholic Church as one important but by no means the only antidemocratic actor in the interwar period. In his chapter on “Central European Nobles during and after the First World War,” Konstantinos Raptis demonstrates, through the example of Count Harrach, that the upper nobility was able to cope with the decline of the Danube Monarchy much better than the members of the service gentry or the petty gentry. Together with the bourgeoisie, the latter experienced a massive social and economic decline. Christopher Brennan dedicates his contribution to the afterlife of the last emperor and king Karl I/IV. His death in exile in 1922 “elicited polarized and emotional reactions” not least because his person was easier to target than his “hollowed” predecessor Franz Joseph. The figure of Karl apparently became “everything to everyone”: “a sinner to anti-Habsburg Pan-

Germans and the republican left [...]; a saint for unshakable imperial loyalists and Catholics; and a cipher for those who saw him as a feeble and unimpressive figure of no consequence, barely worthy of a footnote in history.” Brennan makes some overly apodictic judgements, but he nonetheless shows convincingly how quickly a ruler can become obsolete, in contrast to his empire.

The last part of the volume, entitled “Processing the Empire’s Passing,” focuses on the culture of remembrance and the historiography. Christoph Mick contrasts two once important war monuments in Vienna: a rather pacifistic one at the Central Cemetery and the Heroes’ memorial at Heroes’ Square. Both were intended to give meaning to the enormous human losses in the war, and both were marginalized in the Austrian culture of remembrance, especially after World War II. Co-Editor Paul Miller presents the culture of memory around the heir to the throne, Franz Ferdinand, assassinated in 1914. Miller intends to offer a portrait of the archduke, rather than focusing on the thoroughly researched culture of remembrance surrounding Franz Ferdinand. This task is more complex than it seems at first, as becomes clear from the characterization Miller gives: “Franz Ferdinand was neither a foolish nor frivolous man. He was obstinate, insolent, arrogant, and abrupt. But if the Archduke knew one thing, it was that the Empire he would someday rule was in dire need of reform, and war would only endanger, if not undo, that eventually. This was not a small thing.” This is, unfortunately, a quite well-known thing, too, so the epistemological value of Miller’s enterprise remains low. Regrettably, he mixes the findings of his research with moralistic elements. The reader remains clueless about what to do with generalizations such as this one: “After all, if Austria could hardly avoid the fact that one of their own started World War II, they were far less ready to accept responsibility for the mythicized Monarchy’s role in the first.”

In his afterword, Pieter Judson reminds us of the still dominant ideal of nations and nation states especially after 1918. As this ambitious and, all in all, very successful volume shows, however, new approaches in the study of history will offer new perspectives on the intricate afterlife of the Habsburg Empire. With a view to the irreversibility of the events of 1918, it remains a question whether the largely neglected notion of “adaption” will lead us further than the (hitherto nevertheless very fruitful) binary concepts of “continuity and rupture.”

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