

Zitierhinweis

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At the end of Miklos Banffy's entertaining panoramic novel of pre-WWI Hungary, the protagonist Count Balint takes a final tour of Transylvania before joining his regiment. It is a personal and private farewell to his childhood home and to a whole generation of Hungarian nobles, of which Balint/Banffy was highly critical. The novel ends with the telling words 'Bonczhida, May 20th, 1940'.⁽¹⁾ This massive ancestral castle of the Banffy family in Transylvania was gutted and largely destroyed by Nazi troops shortly after Banffy wrote those words.

Alexander Watson's compelling synthesis of the Central Powers in the First World War locates itself in the flux of Central and Eastern European history, in particular highlighting the links to later traumatic events such as the Holocaust, population displacement and official repression. In the introduction Watson asserts that '[t]he key to the tragic course of the continent's modern history lies in this region [central Europe], and in the extraordinary exertion, unredeemed sacrifices and physical and moral displacement undergone by its people in 1914–18'. (p. 1) Similarly, in summing up the book, Watson writes that: '[t]he First World War was a catastrophe for central and eastern Europe ... War had rent the fabric of the multi-ethnic societies and disastrously exacerbated racial divisions, bequeathing lasting antagonisms above all against older Jewish and new German minorities' (pp. 565–6). Like Banffy, there is a strong sense from Watson's book of an end to an old world and the birth of a new, terrible era.

Three themes underpin the book, all concerning 'the people' (rather than 'elites' or 'the military'). First is consent for the war, how it was obtained, how it functioned, how it ebbed away. Second is the escalating violence throughout the war and its effects, both on war aims and general mentality. Third is the social fragmentation caused by the war. The focus is on the lived experience of the war – by the soldiers, the civilians, the officials – though the main frontline battles are also covered in some depth. Here the book is different from Holger Herwig's earlier work on the Central Powers, which has a more traditional focus on armies, high-level decision-making and military operations.⁽²⁾

I will discuss the book in relation to the perennial questions: Why and how did the war break out? How was it conducted? How was it won and lost? What were its consequences?⁽³⁾ Many of my comments will be in relation to the Habsburg Monarchy, which is my field of research.

On the outbreak of the war, Watson provides a good summary of the machinations of July 1914, one of the most studied months in all history. Watson, like Christopher Clark, emphasizes the importance of Austria-Hungary, where the decisions for war were taken first. (4) Fritz Fischer and his school, which blamed German expansionism and militarism, are given short shrift (p. 31). The mobilization both in Austria-Hungary and in Germany went relatively smoothly and there was widespread consent, epitomized by the German Social Democrats' vote in favour of war credits. Watson's previous work on morale and volunteers serves this section well. Here, as throughout the book, Watson skillfully interweaves testimony from everyday participants to evoke the experience and realities of war.

In the Habsburg Monarchy the officials were heavy handed and overestimated the possible resistance to mobilization. In particular, the knee-jerk suppression of nationalist activity would continue throughout the war, especially from the army. Watson could have elaborated more on the political situation in the Habsburg Monarchy in the years preceding the war and how it affected the war effort. In recent years there have been a number of challenges to the 'nationalist paradigm' in the Habsburg Monarchy. The issue of consent in wartime could have provided a tool to trace continued national indifference, imperial loyalty and pragmatic linguistic and ethnic identity. There are hints scattered throughout the text about the surprising resilience of the Habsburg armies, despite atrocious leadership and almost continual defeats.

What of the conduct of war and how it was won and lost? Watson quickly broaches the subject of war crimes. German and Austria-Hungarian forces undoubtedly committed

breaches of international law, but Watson also points out instances of Allied breaches. A good example of Watson's focus on the 'view from below' is his fascinating account of the small town of Allenstein in Eastern Prussia and its experience of the Russian invasion. In a few pages the reader is plunged into the panic, evacuation, and negotiations of a small town struggling to cope with enemy occupation. Watson persuasively argues that this invasion had profound effects on the psyche of the German people as well as increasing their sense of solidarity. For everyday Germans, the war was one of defence.

In contrast to the case study of Allenstein, the fall of the Przemyśl fortress in Galicia, involving the surrender of a 117,000 strong garrison, is only mentioned in passing. As Watson outlines, the invasion of Galicia and a series of Austro-Hungarian defeats provoked a refugee crisis and, predictably, a wave of anti-Semitism. In the Habsburg Monarchy, food shortages heightened national, ethnic and religious differences, and there was less evidence of solidarity than in Germany.

The war became one of attrition, both on the battlefield and at home. The blockade around the Central Powers had immediate effects, prompting a scramble for resources, not only by individuals on the home front but by whole armies. This desperation only increased as the war continued and conditions worsened. Watson is particularly good at conveying the gradual breakdown of wartime solidarity as food and survival became overwhelming, all-consuming concerns.

In particular, the war aims of Germany and Austria-Hungary were being adjusted in light of the unprecedented sacrifices. Already in September 1914 Bethmann-Hollweg had overseen a secret memorandum advocating as a general aim of the war 'security for the German Reich in west and east for all imaginable time' (p. 258). The interpretation of this aim depended on the circumstances of the time. Bethmann-Hollweg was, in fact, a comparatively moderate, pragmatic advocate of German hegemony over Europe, proposing a mix of annexations and informal domination.

A fundamental change occurred in 1916–17. Verdun, the Brusilov Offensive, the Somme and the devastating 'Turnip Winter' deepened the suffering for the peoples of the Central Powers. Hindenburg and Ludendorff took over German military and, to a large extent, domestic command on 29 August 1916. It was now total commitment and total mobilization; total war in the push for total victory. Under Hindenburg and Ludendorff German war aims became maximal, especially in the East where massive annexations and extensive exploitation of land and resources were planned. Ludendorff had already supervised the notorious Ober Ost occupation (in the Baltic region) – a harsh, repressive regime focused on extracting the maximum from the region's agricultural and human resources. Over time, Hindenburg and Ludendorff had to contend with more and more disgruntled voices in the home front calling for peace. In the final years of the war, the military leadership and the general German populace, including some within the army, began moving along separate and widening paths. For the Habsburg Monarchy, the war aims were initially quite expansive. There was much talk of a German-Austrian *Mitteleuropa* with a reconstituted Poland and Serbia under Habsburg rule. Realities, however, began to bite sooner and harder in the Habsburg Monarchy. Along with the many military defeats, the food situation was extremely bad in Austria (not helped by a lack of co-operation from Hungary). In addition, a suspended parliament along with continued military-inspired repression drained the will of the population. As the German military radicalized, Karl I, the new Emperor of Austria-Hungary searched for a way out of the war. With continued hardship and no end in sight, the very survival of the centuries-old Habsburg Empire was now openly questioned. The Allies rebuffed Karl's peace feelers and when his initiative became public, Austria-Hungary was forced into a subordinate role to the Germany of Hindenburg and Ludendorff.

In the final year of war Germany (and tied to it, Austria-Hungary) resembled a gambler already bankrupt, using credit it did not have, hoping against hope for a miracle. Watson succinctly writes: '[t]he Central Powers chose to go for broke in 1917' (p. 467). At the end of

its tether, Germany reeled from one outcome to another. The unrestricted U-boat campaign was launched but did not bring England to its knees. Instead America joined the Allies. Russia was in the throes of revolution and the breakdown of its army, eventually concluding the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which satisfied many of Germany's territorial aims in the East. Yet the expected food relief was not forthcoming. In the end, all was staked on the final offensive in the Western Front in 1918, before American troops could definitively tip the balance to the Allied camp. Ludendorff's tactical virtuosity and strategic neglect are well highlighted in Watson's account.

These chapters on the course of the war are, of course, the heart of the book. Watson moves from summer campaigns to issues at home until they converge in 1918 with a collective failure of belief in a Central Powers' victory. Amidst the account of events, Watson writes small cogent essays on key topics: battle plans, war aims, war crimes, racial thinking (especially in the East), refugees, communication between the soldiers and their families at home, the food shortages, the Hindenburg Programme (an industrial and propaganda drive to place Germany on a total war footing, which, according to Watson, was not particularly successful), and the unrestricted U-Boat campaign (Watson calls this 'the worst decision of the war'), amongst others. Amidst this admirable detail and investigation of themes, Watson could have provided the reader with more prominent signposts in the narrative to give a firmer sense of his own interpretation of the overall course of the war.

Why did the Allies win? Watson does not directly address this point, though it is clear that the Allied blockade and overall superiority in material and manpower played a key role.

Widespread demoralisation and despair in 1918 both within the military (at the front and in the Navy) and at home (amongst the population and the politicians) meant that Germany simply could no longer continue fighting. Like Tsarist Russia and the Habsburg Monarchy, the army and the people of Germany had been pushed far beyond their limits and many simply refused to fight or make sacrifices for the regime. In all three there were revolutions and the end of the ruling dynasty.

To the final question: what were the consequences? Watson mostly hints at the manifold results of such an all-encompassing, shattering experience. In particular, he notes the difficulty of trying to apply Woodrow Wilson's principle of 'self-determination' to the intermingled and mixed population of East-Central Europe. The one word that is repeatedly used in the short epilogue is 'suffering'. Here Watson tentatively draws some links from the wartime 'suffering, and the jealousies, prejudices and violence that it spawned or exacerbated' (p. 564) with the later crimes of the Nazi time. For Watson, the peoples who had lived through the war were 'deeply traumatized'. (p. 563)

Alexander Watson has written an important book that reconfigures our understanding of the First World War and of European history. It places Central and Eastern Europe, not on the periphery of developments in the West, but at the heart of the key episodes in European contemporary history: war, refugees, population displacement, dictatorship, genocide. The book is written with verve and passion, and will be of benefit for both the general reader and academic scholars. In short, the book both sums up the historiographical field and presents an overarching narrative.

I have a number of minor points. First, is the issue of intertwining individuals into the larger picture. Watson brings out individual voices but often the big picture dominates since he wishes to present a 'total history'. Perhaps interwoven biographies within the larger canvas of the war could have illustrated individual (and family) predicaments. He does this to some extent with the Kohnstern family of Hamburg and it works well. Second, in the discussion of mass psychology, especially in 1918 and in the immediate post-First World War period, some outline of the methodology would have been helpful. How can one write of collective psychology? On what basis can it be assessed?

Finally, I'll return to the Habsburg Monarchy and some more general reflections prompted both by the book and a recent conference I organized on the First World War and Central

European history, which was kindly attended by Alexander Watson. In the final session I posed two open-ended questions. First, what was the conjunction of circumstances, which led to the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy? When was the ‘tipping point’ in its fate? When was the Monarchy no longer a viable or realistic option? Possibly sometime in the course of 1917, as hunger deepened, Austria-Hungary became subservient to Germany and Wilson proclaimed his principle of self-determination. As Maureen Healy as demonstrated, for Vienna’s starving population ‘1917 was the turning point’.(5) Similarly, Mark Cornwall hints at a similar time frame for the army.(6) But what about the whole Monarchy? Miklos Banffy described the Monarchy as a ‘cohesive whole [depending on] a complicated web of alliances, treaties, unwritten agreements and historical relationships’.(7) When and how did it unravel? And what were the chronologies, interrelationships and important conjunction of events? For scholars on the Habsburg Monarchy more investigation of and reflection on these points would have important consequences on the historiography of the war and of the whole epoch of Franz Joseph.

Second, what responsibility does the Imperial army have for the collapse of the Monarchy? There is a double irony here. At the beginning of the war, the Chief of Staff Conrad and many in the military advocated war in order to save the Monarchy (or their idea of it). Moreover, the army has often been represented (most memorably by Oscar Jaszi) as a centripetal force for the Monarchy. Yet its incompetent field leadership led to a series of defeats and its heavy-handed attempt to control and regulate civil society contributed enormously to the sense of alienation and discontent.(8) Posing as its savior and a stabilizing influence within the Habsburg state, the army had, by the end of the war, largely brought about that state’s loss of legitimacy.

Miklos Banffy was a part of one of the Habsburg Monarchy’s foremost aristocratic families. Looking back in his memoirs from 1932, he evoked the end of the war in short, sharp strokes.

We passed dark, unlit stations, rumbling over screeching points and rails that seemed to cry out. It was as if we only went forward to the sobs and complaints of this lost and ruined land that seemed to have been left behind, just part of the debris of war and revolution ... The stormy years were over, but those that followed held no pity for our homeland.(9)

Life was fundamentally different in Central and Eastern Europe after the First World War. What kind of caesura it was and how it linked to subsequent events will probably always be topics for historical debate. Perhaps by the centenary in 2018 there will be a clearer picture of these issues. Hopefully, Alexander Watson’s book will provide a platform for further research and conceptualization of the war and its place in Central and Eastern European history.

Notes

1. Miklos Banffy, *The Transylvanian Trilogy* (Volumes II and III, London, 2013), p. 830.
2. Holger Herwig, *The First World War. Germany and Austria-Hungary 1914–1918* (London, 1997). A second edition was published with Bloomsbury in 2014.
3. Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History. Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 199.
4. Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London, 2012), pp. 391–403.
5. Maureen Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire. Total War and Everyday Life in World War I* (Cambridge, 2007), p. 25.

6. Mark Cornwall, 'Morale and patriotism in the Austro-Hungarian army, 1914–1918', in *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War*, ed. John Horne (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 173–91.
7. Miklos Banffy, *The Transylvanian Trilogy*, p. 313.
8. Jonathan Gumz and John Deak, 'How to break an Empire: lessons from civil-military relations in the Habsburg Monarchy' (article – forthcoming). I am grateful to Jonathan Gumz and John Deak for allowing me to read a copy of this article.
9. Miklos Banffy, *The Phoenix Land* (Londo, 2003), p. 182.

Author's Response

Alexander Watson

I am extremely grateful to Dr. Kwan for a review which was very interesting, thought-provoking and which outlines some of the key issues with which historians of the late Habsburg Empire are currently grappling. I thank him for highlighting the contribution that my book, *Ring of Steel*, seeks to make to these debates.

The purpose of this response is simply to clarify a few points raised in the review, and to engage further with the questions asked at its end about the causes of the Habsburg collapse in 1918. However, I would like to begin by suggesting that Dr. Kwan's description of *Ring of Steel* as a 'synthesis' may be somewhat misleading. For sure, the book takes a broad view of Germany's and Austria-Hungary's war and in doing so owes a great debt to the vast historiography of the last 60 years, including recent innovative literature re-evaluating the peacetime Habsburg Empire, to which Dr. Kwan himself has made valuable contribution. However, at its core, the book is an investigation of the devastating and radicalising impact of 'total war' in East-Central Europe based on over a decade of work in 20 archives in five countries, including neglected but well-organised and exciting repositories in Poland. Thanks to this extensive new research *Ring of Steel* addresses issues which other works have ignored, but yet are essential for understanding the Central Powers' war experiences and their disastrous aftermath.

Two subjects given space in the review offer convenient illustration of this point. *Ring of Steel* provides the very first account of popular mobilisation across Austria-Hungary in the summer of 1914. It shows for the first time the initially high level of popular cooperation and consent. The new Habsburg historiography has argued convincingly that at the municipal and regional level the Empire was generally effective at negotiating with nationalist and other aspirations – and my study pays close attention to how important local opinion-formers (many of whom were nationalist politicians and clergy) played a key role in promoting the Habsburg cause and ensuring popular compliance. National identity and nationalist ideology – usually characterised in the literature as purely destructive 'centrifugal' forces – joined with other nationally indifferent and imperial loyalties to ensure that in this first, critical period, society mobilised for war extremely successfully all across the Habsburg Empire.

Ring of Steel's account of the Russian invasion of East Prussia – another subject given space in the review – is similarly groundbreaking. While the German army's violence against civilians in Belgium and France in 1914 is well-researched, almost nothing was known of Russian depredations in the Reich's most north-easterly province between August 1914 and March 1915. My research in archives in Berlin and Olsztyn (Poland) confirmed that the Tsar's military killed around 1,500 German civilians and deported another 13,000 under lethal conditions. It also uncovered a mass of first-hand testimonies of suffering by victims and witnesses, some of which are reproduced in the book. As Dr. Kwan writes in his review, I argue that this trauma at the conflict's outset, which was transmitted by various channels

throughout the country, was formative in shaping ordinary Germans' predominantly defensive understanding of why the war was being fought and what was at stake.

The archival research on which *Ring of Steel* is based is not the only reason for the book's originality. The account is written specifically from the perspectives of Austria-Hungary and Germany, and this allows for new interpretations of some well-known events, which I hope will provoke discussion among historians. A good example is the book's re-examination of Germany's war aims in the east; a topic of enormous importance. 50 years ago, Fritz Fischer famously, but not wholly convincingly, attempted to trace these back to the pre-First World War imperial German Reich. By contrast, *Ring of Steel* argues that the First World War was decisive in turning German leaders' gaze eastwards, and it pays unprecedentedly close attention to how war events shaped and radicalised their ambitions. The book argues that two actions by Germany's enemies were especially important. First, Russian attacks on East Prussia in 1914 prompted the first plans within German official circles for annexation in the east (of a border strip) and, ominously, population exchange. Second, the Entente encirclement and illegal British naval blockade of the Central Powers – the 'ring of steel' in the title of my book – was central to prompting a change in German official and military understandings of security. Defensible borders and economic advantage ceased to be sufficient; concerns about food security became paramount and expansion eastwards for blockade-proof agricultural land became a priority. Notably for Ludendorff, concern about the Reich's food supply caused a shift to an increasingly extreme annexationist stance as early as 1915. His rise, along with Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, to command the German war effort in the second half of 1916 would cement the country on an expansionary drive which would in limited but significant ways look forward to Nazi plans for eastern *Lebensraum*.

I am very grateful to Dr. Kwan for emphasising the diverse topics explored by *Ring of Steel*. The book is wide-ranging because the core theme holding together the narrative – the devastating and radicalising impact of 'total war' in East-Central Europe – embraces all aspects of that region's politics and society. As Dr. Kwan observes, I regard widespread popular consent, sacrifice and suffering to be a central part of the story, and much of the book is devoted to explaining these phenomena. He is absolutely right to stress the problems and pitfalls of writing on the collective psychology of peoples over more than four years of all-encompassing conflict and to want more detail on methodology. *Ring of Steel* was written for a general, as well as an academic audience, so lengthy methodological discussion would have been out of place. However, readers of this review who are interested in my approach to studying issues of mass psychology should consult my earlier monograph, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918*.^(1a) Here, I can only stress that *Ring of Steel*'s conclusions are based on the critical evaluation and comparison of interesting, very diverse but compatible sources. Letter censorship summaries, police reports, statistical material and manifestations of popular wartime culture from rumours to soldiers' songs and nursery rhymes offer breadth, while letters and diaries provide depth to the book's discussion of societal and military morale and the personal experience of 'total war'.

Dr. Kwan ends his review by asking two fascinating and complex questions: (1) What conjunction of circumstances led to the Habsburg Empire's collapse? and (2) What blame can be attributed to the army? The answers in *Ring of Steel* are, I suspect, rather different from the conclusions which he and some other Habsburg specialists might favour – and, I hope, will foster fruitful debate. In my interpretation, 1914, not 1917 has to stand as the critical year. Alone among Europe's governments, the Habsburg Empire's leaders planned a war in the summer of 1914. They saw conflict – albeit a limited attack on Serbia, not the European cataclysm which they knew could result from their actions – as their only means to eliminate existential threats from predatory neighbours and internal dissolution. The awful irony is that these elites, in seeking through reckless military adventure to save their Empire, set it on the

road to destruction. Not only did they vastly overestimate the external danger but, as recent historiography has emphasised and as the success of popular mobilisation in the summer of 1914 surely proves, they tragically underestimated their own peoples' loyalty. The Emperor and his civilian ministers, above all the Foreign Minister and his advisors – not the military – made the fateful decision to take the Habsburg Empire to war. The army's incompetence, brutality and distrust of Slavic minorities certainly contributed to the subsequent disaster and delegitimisation of the state, but civilian authorities were guilty of similar failings. Austria's government distrusted its peoples too much to recall their elected representatives to the state's parliament, and in consequence failed to cement the solidarity of the summer of 1914 and made it easy – as defeat loomed – for the peoples to reject the war as an irresponsible imperial adventure launched without their consent. During hostilities, nothing did more than incompetent food management to turn subjects against their imperial rulers, and here again civilian authorities bore a heavy burden of blame: Hungarian Minister Presidents selfishly limited food exports to malnourished Austria, and Austria's government was lackadaisical, trailing behind the Germans in implementing food-saving measures and a workable ration system. Incompetent foreign policy too helped bring down the Habsburgs. Rash decisions in 1918 at Brest-Litovsk and Spa irretrievably alienated first the Empire's Poles and then its other Slavs, and – with the encouragement of exiles and the Empire's enemies – prompted more and more of its subjects to seek salvation from misery, hunger and bloodshed in a deeply flawed nation-state ideal. The rash Habsburg decision to prepare a war in 1914 led directly to disaster. Already by mid-1915, the Empire was doomed to emerge greatly changed for the worse: Entente victory would then probably have meant Russian annexation of its north-easterly territories – with grave consequences for internal stability – while German leaders were plotting to strengthen its Austrian German element internally and, after they won the war, reduce it to a satellite state. That same decision also exposed the militarily ill-prepared Empire to invasion, mass death and extraordinary deprivation, which by 1917 had delegitimised it in the eyes of many of its subjects. If this interpretation is correct, to understand the Empire's demise we need more research not only on the Empire's peoples, especially its Slavic peripheries and Hungary, but also on its rulers: why were they so fearful in 1914? How could they have so disastrously underestimated the internal resilience of their Empire? And why did they prove so exceptionally incompetent in managing a 'total' war effort? *Ring of Steel* provides some answers. I share Dr. Kwan's hope that by 2018 new research will provide further insights into the Habsburg Empire's collapse.

Notes

1. Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914–1918* (Cambridge, 2008).