Forum: The Adriatic, the Alps, and the Danube: Identities, Categories of Identification, and Identifications
Introduction

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In this regard, historians were reproducing the views that prevailed in the Habsburg Empire before 1918. For instance, when Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Mensdorff-Pouilly tried to explain the Austrian Empire to the British Ambassador in Vienna in 1866, he began with

1Oscar Jászi, The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy (Chicago, 1929), 3.
“Was sei die österreichische Monarchie? Es sei ein Reich von Nationalitäten.”

Almost without exception, journalists, intellectuals, politicians, and many others—even those who did not think that the Habsburg Empire was destined to fail and disintegrate into nation-states—were convinced that the empire was multinational and that its entire population belonged to the “ten nations” about which Jászi was writing.

Curiously, this outlook remained dominant in Habsburg historiography even after modernism became the leading paradigm in the study of nations and nationalism. As most scholars of nationalism came to realize that nations were a modern phenomenon and rejected “national awakening” as a relevant explanatory framework, historians of the Habsburg Empire—as Jeremy King has shown—only modified their terminology. When writing about periods before the nineteenth century, they started using the terms “ethnic groups” or “ethnicities” instead of “nations”; the gist, however, remained the same: Czechs had always been Czechs, Hungarians always Hungarians, and so on. In short, the entire population—or at least a large majority—was again assigned to ten groups.

Seemingly, historians—who, as a group, have invested a great deal of intellectual and symbolic capital in the construction of long histories of “their nations”—were largely unable to let go of this crumbling edifice. Because of that, identifications found in the sources that did not match modern national categories were ignored or explained away. If modern nations were not centuries old, historians and some other scholars continued to claim, ethnic groups were. Ethnic identities, they further insisted, were all-pervasive and decisively shaped the emergence of nations. Knowingly or unknowingly, and with only a few exceptions, historians of the Habsburg Empire became ethno-symbolists, using a theoretically flawed paradigm, which simply did not fit the historical data, as their explanatory framework.


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Yet eventually (and only gradually), things began to change as new approaches, informed by recent theorizing, gained ground. In the last few decades, the historiography of the Habsburg Empire has made great strides and our understanding of identifications in this large Central European polity has become much more nuanced.\(^\text{10}\) The image of the Habsburg Empire as a mosaic of mutually exclusive ethnic groups increasingly came into question as it became apparent that ethnicity was not a relevant category of identification in all situations. Additionally, it became clear that modern nations did not evolve out of preexisting ethnic groups, and that there were many more collective identifications in the prenational period than there are modern nations. Before the onset of nationalism, nonethnic categories of identification, such as religion, social status, and vocation, were often dominant and ethnic identifications were usually much more local. Most of the rural population identified with their village, parish, or valley, and perceived the lands outside their home province as “foreign.”\(^\text{11}\) Identification with ethnic communities territorially congruent with modern nations was rare, if it existed at all. The Slovene nation, for instance, was an invention that only started to take shape at the beginning of the nineteenth century; previously, most inhabitants of the region identified with their province or an even smaller region.\(^\text{12}\) Similarly, the modern Slovak nation was not the offspring of a Slovak ethnic community—such a thing never existed—but a result of nationalist activities; for most Slavophones of present-day Slovakia, Slovakness only really became a relevant identification after 1918, in Czechoslovakia.\(^\text{13}\) Recent research has also refuted the still dominant view that the Serb nation is a continuation of an earlier Serb ethnic community. Like other modern nations, it was at first an intellectual concept from the turn of the nineteenth century; it only gained relevance as it was successfully disseminated among the population in schools and through other institutions.\(^\text{14}\)


\(^{13}\)Alexander Maxwell, Choosing Slovakia: Slavic Hungary, the Czechoslovak Language, and Accidental Nationalism (London, 2009).

Furthermore, recent research has persuasively shown that even as modern nationalism started to gain ground and nationhood became relevant, the nation was a pertinent category of identification only in some situations and for some people. Unquestionably, nationalists were able to mobilize thousands at certain moments, and for many people identification with a nation was a very important part of their lives. Yet despite all the nationalists’ efforts, many still refused to identify with any nation or did so only in certain situations.15 Research on national indifference has shown that the “good soldier Reberšek,” the Slovene-speaking private who in his World War I-era correspondence showed a great affection for his home province, Styria, but self-identified as a Slovene only once, was no exception.16 Even as late as World War I, nationalism could hardly mobilize everyone. Like many of his comrades, the Italian-speaking Giacinto Giacomolli from Trentino refused to fight for the “Italia irredenta” and chose to stay in a Russian POW camp instead.17 Historians have also established that Reberšek’s understated dynastic patriotism—he commented on the death of Francis Joseph with “the old Joe left this world now”—was also not exceptional. Moreover, Jászi’s rather rigid division of “centripetal” and “centrifugal” forces has been refuted; quite often, dynastic patriotism went hand in hand with nationalism.18

Last, but not least, historians have also recently shown that the present-day nations and their territorial arrangement were not the only possible outcome of historical processes in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The “nationalization of the masses” was not only complicated but also fairly open-ended. While Croat, Serb, and Slovene nationalists argued that the Croats, Serbs, and Slovenes were distinct nations, Yugoslav nationalists—sometimes the same people—claimed they were in fact all Yugoslavs. Precisely because Slovene and Croat nationalists were quite often Yugoslav nationalists at the same time, they were extremely reluctant or entirely unwilling to draw a border that would unequivocally separate,


17Cole, “Differentiation or Indifference?,” 97–98. On the varied and dynamic identifications of Italian-speaking soldiers from Trentino during World War I, see Quinto Antonelli, I dimenticati della grande guerra: la memoria dei combattenti trentini, 1914–1920, 2nd ed. (Trento, 2014); Simone Attilio Bellezza, Tornare in Italia: Come i prigionieri trentini in Russia divennero Italiani (1914–1920) (Bologna, 2016). I am grateful to Francesco Frizzera for drawing my attention to these two highly informative books. On Austro-Hungarian POWs in Russia, see also Iris (formerly Alon) Rachamimov, POWs and the Great War: Captivity on the Eastern Front (Oxford, 2002).

say, Slovenes and Croats. Similarly, nominal Czechs and Slovaks were often simultaneously
perceived as Czechoslovaks. Joep Leerssen’s remark that “the history of nationalisms is far
more complex than merely a pre-history of the contemporary states,” applies to nationalisms
in Habsburg Central Europe too.

To summarize, historians of the Habsburg Empire have largely abandoned the nationalized
and deterministic outlook on its history even if some still cling, as Pieter M. Judson illustrated in
the 2017 Robert A. Kann lecture, to an anachronistic picture of the crumbling state being
irrevocably pulled apart by national tensions. A comparison of the latest survey, Judson’s
The Habsburg Empire, not only with Jászi’s book but also with more recent ones, makes this
transformation abundantly clear. The story of “ten nations” has been replaced by a much
more complex narrative that emphasizes the contingent and situational character of
identifications and finds agency with people, not reified groups.

Case studies included in this forum further validate such an approach. They were developed
from the papers presented at the conference “Identities, Categories of Identification, and
Identifications between the Danube, the Alps, and the Adriatic.” The conference was hosted
by the Department of History at the University of Ljubljana, the Institute of Contemporary
History, the National Museum of Contemporary History, and the Viennese Ludwig
Boltzmann Institute for Historical Social Science, and it gathered more than twenty scholars
from Europe and the United States. Its aim was to present and analyze identifications in
diverse settings and in different periods, thus further questioning teleological national
narratives. The articles selected for the forum focus on the Habsburg Empire in the long
nineteenth century and show that even at the turn of the twentieth century, nations, while
undoubtedly important, were not always the most relevant category of identification;
sometimes they were not relevant at all. Identification with nations was offered—sometimes
imposed—from above as nationalists tried to nationalize the population, and it was driven by
events—elections, wars, trials, and so on. Yet even as nationalisms were increasingly salient,
supranational patriotism remained relevant and not necessarily in conflict with
ethnolinguistic nationalism. Furthermore, groups could still coalesce across alleged national
borders around a business interest, a common profession, or a social class, while an ethnic
boundary could form contrary to linguistic classifications and nationalist beliefs. Because of
that, ethnicist and groupist language is of limited use for describing and analyzing the past
or, for that matter, the present.

To conclude, the aim of this forum is not to whitewash the history of Austria-Hungary, to
claim there were no nationalists and nationalism, to suggest the empire was a paragon of
peaceful coexistence without conflicts. Certainly not! Nationalism was a salient ideology,
capable of mobilizing thousands, and there were many nationalist conflicts, some quite violent. Yet workers in, for instance, Marburg/Maribor, a town on the so-called language frontier, continued to celebrate May Day together, and self-identifying Czech workers often felt greater affinity toward German-speaking workers then toward the Czech middle class and nobility.\(^{23}\)

Austria-Hungary was not nonnational: Identification with a nation was one of the modes of group building and certainly not the least important one; however, the Habsburg Empire was also not just a patchwork of nations or ethnic groups. In some situations, and for many people, the nation was hardly relevant as a category of identification; at times, it was entirely irrelevant. Additionally, the boundaries of national “imagined communities” were flexible, and “others”—as Edin Hajdarpasić has shown—could sometimes be “brothers.”\(^{24}\)

The articles in this forum only further confirm that as historians we really ought to move away from reified identities and start seeing identifications as highly situational and contingent. After all, did not even nationalist politicians and other so-called ethnic entrepreneurs demonstrate just that when they enrolled their children in German-language schools to make them bilingual and consequently better prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the future? In this situation, and contrary to all their ideological goals and policies, they acted pragmatically, as “caring parents” and not as nationalists.

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