Habsburg History, Eastern European History …

Central European History?

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GERMANY and all things German have long been the primary concern of Central European History (CEH), yet the journal has also been intimately tied to the lands of the former Habsburg monarchy. As the editor stated in the first issue, published in March 1968, CEH emerged "in response to a widespread demand for an American journal devoted to the history of German-speaking Central Europe," following the demise of the Journal of Central European Affairs in 1964. The Conference Group for Central European History sponsored CEH, as well as the recently minted Austrian History Yearbook (AHY).¹ Robert A. Kann, the editor of AHY, sat on the editorial board of CEH, whose second issue featured a trenchant review by István Deák of Arthur J. May’s The Passing of the Habsburg Monarchy, 1914–1918. The third issue contained the articles “The Defeat of Austria–Hungary in 1918 and the Balance of Power” by Kann, and Gerhard Weinberg’s “The Defeat of Germany in 1918 and the Balance of Power.” That same year, East European Quarterly published its first issue.

CEH still claims as its focus the “history of Germany, Austria, and other German-speaking regions of Central Europe from the medieval era to the present,” a slight reworking of the original mandate to study the history of “German-speaking Central Europe.”² These parameters—echoes of Kulturträger and Mitteleuropa aside—encompass two ancillary fields of historical inquiry, Habsburg history and Eastern European history, which have remained largely distinct from German history. Within each of these two ancillary fields, powerful questions that emerged in the wake of World War I and later the establishment of Soviet-style Communism in Europe have exercised an extraordinary gravitational pull on Anglo-American scholarship. These predominant questions have long defined—and bounded—Habsburg and Eastern European history.³ Recently, however, the fields of

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¹"From the Editors" [Douglas Unfug], Central European History (CEH) 1, no. 1 (1968): 3. Reprinted in this commemorative issue.


³These parameters, along with the emergence of distinct fields of inquiry, help to explain why “the percentage of articles [published in Central European History] devoted to Austria, the Habsburg lands (including the successor states of the empire), as well as Switzerland decreased from almost 15 percent between 1968
inquiry have begun to blur, and new questions demand to be asked. It is now the time to imagine a new field of inquiry, as well as a new set of questions, that might redefine “Central European history.”

Not long before the end of World War I, Robert William Seton-Watson published, with former Times correspondent Henry Wickham Steed and future Czechoslovak president Tomáš Masaryk, the first issue of New Europe. Its declared purpose was to educate statesmen and the general public about the lands of the Habsburg monarchy, and to work toward “the emancipation of the subject races of central and south-eastern Europe from German and Magyar control” as a counter to “the Pangerman [sic] project of ‘Central Europe’ and ‘Berlin-Baghdad.’”4 “Emancipation” did come, thanks in large part to the lobbying efforts by Seton-Watson and Masaryk. Present at the founding of a new field of historical study, these and other well-placed men then presented an interpretation of Habsburg history intended to legitimize the successor states.5 This interpretation held that the Habsburg monarchy had been an anachronistic, repressive, backward entity whose fate had become entwined with that of an aggressive Germany. More important, this interpretation held that the monarchy had been a “prison-house of nations” that necessarily had to give way to nation-states. Nations, coherent entities moving through history and possessing a common set of characteristics, had struggled within this repressive structure, they argued, until their liberation in 1918.

Habsburg scholars have been wrestling with this interpretation ever since, and, in so doing, have engaged two sets of interrelated questions. The first often took the form of an autopsy: why did the monarchy collapse—or, more precisely, how might one understand the dynamics of the Habsburg monarchy, and how might, or might not, those dynamics have led to the monarchy’s demise? The momentum has been against interwar characterizations of the monarchy as brittle and doomed, beginning with Oszkár Jásci’s exploration of “centripetal” and “centrifugal” forces at work within Austria–Hungary before 1914.6 After 1945, succeeding generations of scholars added further nuance to our understanding of imperial politics and rule.7 Others complicated prevailing notions about the monarchy’s alleged economic backwardness and military incompetence.8 The shift to social and cultural history in the 1960s and

and 1987 to less than 6 percent since 1990.” See Andrew I. Port, “Central European History since 1989: Historiographical Trends and Post-Wende ‘Turns,’” CEH 48, no. 2 (2015): 238–48 (quote on p. 244). Port’s article provides a superb overview of the various methodological “turns” that have defined German history, and history more broadly, in the past decades. My focus, however, is on the predominant research questions; this excludes, of course, discussion of a vast number of innovative, insightful works in our fields.


1970s encouraged a focus on the rise of modern political movements, mass politics, and even modernity itself within the monarchy. Most recently, historians have begun to focus on the experiences of World War I to pursue more doggedly the question of whether the monarchy was doomed, or whether it dissolved primarily as a result of self-destructive domestic policies and the strains of the war. The emerging consensus has been the latter, a consensus buttressed by recent scholarship that has emphasized the enduring, and perhaps surprising, viability of the monarchy up through 1914.

A second set of questions sought to trace out the rise of nations and nationalisms, often in ways that challenged the “prison-house of nations” interpretation of Habsburg history. Crucial here were the horrors of World War II. Whereas interwar Anglo-American scholars had tended to equate nationalism with liberalism, with political determination being grounded in a nation’s right to its own state—or collective rights within a state—post-1945 scholars sought to understand the origins and pathologies of nationalism. Primordialists ceded ground to constructivists, thus undermining the belief in the natural existence—and rights—of nations. Hans Kohn’s intellectual history, published in 1944, traced the origins of the Western (civic and democratic) and Eastern (ethnic and organic) variants of nationalism that had allegedly divided the continent. Ernest Gellner’s postwar scholarship traced the emergence of a united, homogenous nation to modernizing forces and the rise of the state. It is telling that both emerged from a Prague echoing with German-Jewish attempts to understand nationalism and national belonging.

Other historians turned more directly to the rise of nationalism within the Habsburg context. Similar to Miroslav Hroch’s study of early nineteenth-century Czech national awakeners, Gary Cohen’s work on Prague Germans demonstrated, among other things, that nationality was not fate, but situational and a choice inspired, at least in part, by socioeconomic concerns.
pointed to the key role that “professional nationalists” had played in mobilizing nationalism within parties and associational life. More recently, historians have pointed to the surprising persistence of national ambiguity, bilingualism, and side-switching within the monarchy. Tara Zahra’s work argues that it was the presence of national indifference—just as much as, if not more so than, national rivalry—that fueled Czech and German activism from the late nineteenth-century onward. Other scholars have emphasized the ways in which loyalty to the Habsburg regime and national loyalty were not necessarily at odds. The original interpretations of nationalism as the monarchy’s downfall have now been turned inside out, as witnessed most powerfully in Pieter Judson’s magisterial new history of the Habsburg monarchy. Synthesizing a generation of research within a tightly woven interpretative history, Judson argues that national activists were implicated in an empire whose “very institutions and administrative practices shaped nationalist efforts.” Rather than a “prison-house of nations,” historians such as Judson, working in the Anglo-American tradition, understand the monarchy as having been an incubator for various forms of nationalism that existed within—and became dependent on—the empire, its institutions, and its practices.

Just as Anglo-American writing on Habsburg history first emerged during World War I, Anglo-American studies of Eastern Europe arose within the context of the Cold War. Indeed, much of the field has depended, and continues to depend, on federal Title VI area-studies funding established soon after the Soviet launch of Sputnik I in 1957. In some instances, assumptions about Eastern European “backwardness” forged during the

Enlightenment informed efforts to seek out the origins of Eastern European Communist rule deep in the past. Predominant questions emerged over the course of Communist rule in the region: How did the Communists assume power, and what were the mechanisms of rule? How might one understand the 1956 upheavals in Poland and Hungary, and the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia? What explains the emergence of various dissident movements, as well as Solidarity, and what were they hoping to achieve? Finally, how and why did Communist rule collapse in 1989—and why so swiftly? Why did the end of Communism play out so differently across the region?

Similar to the scholarship on Nazi Germany, studies drawing on various understandings of totalitarian rule have, over time, given way to more nuanced understandings of the dynamics of Communist rule, the relationship between state and society, as well as individual agency and complicity. Rather than a system of rule uniformly imposed by an outside power, scholars have asked how local Communist rulers “translated” Soviet Communism, as Molly Pucci writes. Attention to specific contexts and local actors have demonstrated how, even in the era of Stalinism, Communist rule differed greatly among the countries of the region. Other scholars have pointed to the many reasons citizens might have supported, or at least tolerated, the establishment of Communist rule. Others, often drawing upon studies of consumption and gender, have sought to capture the experience of life under Communism: they go beyond seeing the peoples of Eastern Europe simply as victims of Communism, as objects of rule, as collaborators, or as heroic dissidents. Historians have also complicated our Cold War notions of what Eastern Europeans hoped to achieve in challenging Communist rule, how they envisioned Communism, reform Communism, or post-Communism. Similar

to recent scholarship on the Habsburg monarchy, the most recent Anglo-American scholarship on Eastern Europe has explored the origins of regime collapse, while cautioning against seeing Communism’s demise as inevitable, or seeing Communist rule as uniformly ruinous, harmful, and morally bankrupt. Recent scholarship in both fields has often questioned triumpal narratives that emerged shortly after regime collapse.

Much of the scholarship on the German Democratic Republic has shared many of the same questions and methodological innovations as Eastern European history.26 It is thus surprising that East German history and Eastern European history—despite these similarities, and other similar phenomena deserving of intraregional study—have largely remained separate from each other.27 This unnatural separation will change, no doubt, especially as historians of Germany and Eastern Europe continue to embrace a “transnational turn,” paying particular attention to cross-border flows and movements, or writing comparative and borderland histories that escape the nation-state framework.28 Historians of the Cold War have


explored the “from below” connections across the region that informed, for example, Willy Brandt’s Ostpolitik, environmentalist activism, and Communist-era mobility practices. Focus has also turned to Germans and German-speakers beyond the borders of twentieth-century Germany—efforts that have, among other things, produced innovative insights into the dynamics of interwar politics, as well as into Nazi rule and questions of collaboration. The fall of Communism witnessed a renewed interest in the expulsion of Germans from Eastern Europe, and groundbreaking urban histories have probed the effects that the unmistakable absence of Germans has had on the cityscapes and cultures they left behind.

Just as important, scholars who focus on the lands of Eastern Europe and the former Habsburg monarchy have now adopted questions that are predominant within German history. Nowhere is this development more obvious than in the realm of Holocaust studies, as evidenced by the cohorts of recent research fellows at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The opening of the archives in Poland and elsewhere has revealed how war in the East radicalized efforts to find a “solution” to the so-called

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Jewish question, for example, and how Eastern Europe acted as an experimental field for techniques later deployed in industrial killing centers throughout the region. Despite Communist-era and contemporary efforts to manipulate the history of the Holocaust, scholars based within and outside the region have asked provocative, insightful questions about local complicity. Thoughtful explorations of fateful choices, as well as innovative studies of Jewish resistance, have increasingly focused on lives lived in Eastern Europe. Probing scholarship has examined Jewish survivors and Eastern European memories of the Holocaust across time.

Fields of inquiry—composed of predominant questions within Habsburg, Eastern European, or German history—will no doubt continue to intermingle, just as colleagues from different regions and continents have greater opportunities for cooperation. Scholars of the former Habsburg lands and Eastern Europe might take a cue from their colleagues in German history, where Anglo-American-German cooperation and exchange have been especially robust in recent decades. Other models might be found in intraregional partnerships and collaborative research projects that bring together scholars exploring common research questions. One would also do well to listen to and take inspiration from the questions and research agendas being pursued by scholars in post-Communist Europe. In-country scholars have, for example, done much to invigorate the field of Jewish history in the region. Other historians there are producing innovative studies of the transition from Communism, with an eye on the challenges, corruption, and disappointments that...

33Christopher Browning, with Jürgen Matthäus, The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1942 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004). For another influential reinterpretation of the Holocaust that places the lands of Eastern Europe at the center of analysis, see Timothy Snyder, Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin (New York: Basic Books, 2010).


37A number of crucial nodes for intraregional cooperation have emerged since 1989, such as the Visegrad Fund, the Polish Center for Holocaust Research, the German Historical Institute Warsaw, the Center for Urban History of East–Central Europe in Lviv, the Imre Kertész Kolleg in Jena, and the European University Viadrina, Frankfurt/Oder.

emerged after 1989. More must also be done to support graduate students in the wake of Title VI funding cuts, and to provide speaking and publishing opportunities for scholars from the region. US-based scholars of Habsburg, Eastern European, and German history have a duty to support scholars in the region, including their colleagues at Central European University in Budapest, as well as those who dare to work outside dominant national narratives or refuse to follow research agendas set by powerful institutes of national memory.

We, the readers of and contributors to CEH, also have an opportunity to create something new—to help constitute Central European history as a field of inquiry defined by a new set of predominant questions. These might probe phenomena that followed collapse, rather than how and why regimes collapsed. Taking a cue from our colleagues in the region, we are now, almost thirty years after the fall of Communism, well-positioned to step into the post-1989 era. Questions first devised by social scientists might be reworked. How might we understand the various political trajectories within the region, as well as the region’s integration into the European Union? How have the transitions from Communism been experienced and understood across the region? When did the post-Communist period end—or do the echoes, legacies, and everyday patterns of existence of the Communist period, e.g., in gender relations, continue to exert themselves? How might we understand present-day migration to the region—and the oftentimes violent reactions that it provokes—within the arc of Communist and post-Communist history? We might also ask questions related to the emergence of states and societies from the collapse of imperial Germany and the Habsburg monarchy, remembering that, for many regions east of the Rhine, the violence and upheavals of war did not end in 1918. With this larger context in mind, we might also reconsider why only one liberal democracy (barely) remained in the region by 1938. Along similar lines, we might ask disturbing questions that speak to our shared political moment: Can mass politics exist free of the politics of hate? How can liberal democracies, for all their messiness, resist the temptation of orderly authoritarianism?


40Here we might take inspiration from histories of twentieth-century Europe that have united both halves of the continent within narratives that pursue a common set of questions regarding the rise and fall of non-democratic ideologies, common efforts to recover from the destruction of World War II, or the various forms of modernization at play across the continent. See, e.g., Mark Mazower, Dark Continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1999); Tony Judt, Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945 (New York: Penguin Press, 2005); Ian Kersaw, To Hell and Back, Europe 1914–1949 (New York: Viking, 2015); Konrad Hugo Jarausch, Out of Ashes: A New History of Europe in the Twentieth Century (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).


42For one contemporary effort to address a version of these questions, see Thomas Ort, Art and Life in Modernist Prague: Karel Čapek and His Generation, 1911–1938 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
Another set of questions might recast the study of nationalism in the region. What explains the remarkable persistence of nationalism and the apparent need for national loyalties? Here we might turn to the history of emotions to revisit questions first posed by Benedict Anderson and trace out the various kinship and existential needs that “imagined” nations fulfill. Can national loyalties and national thinking embrace difference while still providing a sense of community, a sense of belonging? How might we imagine other, more just or inclusive forms of community—and are such efforts practical? Here we might return to the early nineteenth century, a time when intellectuals experimented with various national visions, as well as with other visions of social organization, within the peculiar Central European moment that followed the Napoleonic Wars. We might, recalling Kohn and Gellner, listen to the echoes of the Prague Circle and their contemporaries elsewhere in Central Europe, who struggled to create a sense of belonging amid national divisions and rising xenophobia. These are all questions that concern historians of Germany and the lands of post-Habsburg, post-Communist Europe. They are questions that scholars—as intellectuals, citizens, and humanists—need to continue asking, as darker impulses threaten the region and elsewhere. Unlike the various “grand” questions posed by our nineteenth-century predecessors, they should possess an awareness that no definitive “solutions” or “answers” can be found. Yet, these questions can inspire action in the United States and Europe, while offering a better understanding of the past.

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