

ARTICLE

Alois Musil (1868–1944), the Moravian Lawrence of Arabia: The Question of Coloniality in Central Europe

Matthew Rampley 

Department of Art History, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic
Email: rampley@phil.muni.cz

Abstract

A recurring issue of debate for scholars of Central Europe has been the extent to which analyses of European colonialism apply to Austria-Hungary and its successor states. This article considers this issue in relation to the theologian, archeologist, and scholar of Arabic culture, Alois Musil (1868–1940). Long celebrated in Austria and Czechoslovakia, he has seldom been subject to critical analysis. A loyal Habsburg subject—and confessor to the Empress Zita until 1918—then an enthusiastic promoter of Czechoslovakia and co-founder of the Institute of Oriental Studies in Prague, Musil was a striking example of how individuals in Central Europe adapted to changing political realities. The article focuses in particular on his attitudes to European colonialism. On the one hand, he was critical of British and Italian colonialism, but he worked to further Habsburg imperial interests in the Middle East. When discussing Japanese ambitions in the 1930s, he emphasized the superiority of European colonial rule. He illustrates the complex stance of many Czechs (and other Central Europeans) toward colonialism. They imagined they were innocent of its taint but were in fact enmeshed in it, often endorsing it or acting as agents of the schemes of the European powers.

Keywords: colonialism; Alois Musil; Czechoslovakia; orientalism; Arabia; Qusayr ‘Amra

Introduction: Colonial Debates

A recurring issue of debate for scholars of Central and Eastern Europe has been the extent to which analyses of European colonialism apply to Austria-Hungary and its successor states. The Habsburg state may have been designated an empire, but it could hardly be compared to the colonial powers of Britain, France, Japan, Portugal, Belgium, Russia, or even Italy.¹ It possessed only one formal colony: the modest territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina, which it annexed in 1908, having administered it “on behalf” of the Ottoman Empire since 1878.

Such observations have long underpinned a sense of Austrian “exceptionalism.” In relation to the topic of orientalism, for example, it has been argued that in contrast to France and Britain, Austrian scholarship on the Islamic world comprised a type—“participatory study of the Orient” (“partizipative Orientwissenschaft”). As one commentator has put it, for Austria, lacking territorial ambitions, the Islamic world was “a site of participatory inquiry, that aroused curiosity *Orientwissenschaft* ... was an empirical science that approached the Orient and its inhabitants entirely without any prejudice.”²

¹As John Connelly has recently pointed out, this was with some reserve. Francis II was crowned Austrian Emperor in 1804, but as emperor of the Austrian imperial state (*Kaisertum*) not of an empire, and this was connected to anxieties over the status of the Habsburg ruler in relation to his peers in Europe. “Was the Habsburg Empire an Empire?” *Austrian History Yearbook* 54 (2023): 1–14.

²Andreas Feichtinger, “Komplexer k. u. k. Orientalismus: Akteure, Institutionen, Diskurse im. 19 und 20. Jahrhundert in Österreich,” in *Orientalismen in Ostmitteleuropa: Diskurse, Akteure und Disziplinen vom 19. Jahrhundert bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg*, ed. Robert Born and Sarah Lemmen (Vienna, 2014), 31–64, here, 59.

This conception has, for some time, been subject to critical scrutiny. As Walter Sauer pointed out, Austria-Hungary's inability to replicate the overseas colonial expansion of its European neighbors was largely due to incompetence than to lack of ambition. In other words, Austria-Hungary *did* have territorial ambitions, but it was never successful in pursuing them. Moreover, the Habsburg state was a major participant in and beneficiary of the European colonial order, its subjects enjoying preferential access to resources and markets in colonial territories across the globe.³ Austria-Hungary was one of the eight powers that suppressed the Boxer Rebellion in China, for example, and much diplomatic energy was subsequently expended on securing economic advantage in China and Japan from that fact.⁴

Even the putatively "subaltern" peoples of the empire, Czechs, Poles, Hungarians, and others enjoyed a privileged position in this regard, and recent work has highlighted the extent to which they entertained conceptions of their status, as white Europeans, that were hardly distinguishable from colonial attitudes held in London, Paris, or Brussels.⁵ Yet it has proven hard to dispense with the myth of "colonial innocence" and the associated politics of cultural representation.⁶ A large-scale exhibition on *Japonisme* in the Habsburg Empire staged in Budapest in 2020 reiterated the claim that the Habsburg Empire constituted a special case due to its lack of colonial ambitions in respect to Japan, and that the artistic and cultural interest in Japan on the part of the artists, designers, and architects of Habsburg Central Europe was based on an entirely selfless curiosity in another culture.⁷ Similarly, one of the leading authorities on Czech-language travel literature has recently claimed that Czech travelers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries practiced a "non-colonial tourism" unencumbered by the expressions of power associated with their British, French, and German contemporaries.⁸ The primary focus of this article is on Czech culture, but a comparable assertion has been made in respect to Polish travelers, too, who were, it has been suggested, exponents of a non-invasive "vagabond tourism" and holders of a "non-colonial" gaze.⁹

There are many reasons why such exceptionalism has proven so tenacious. An important factor is the way that colonial questions fed into conceptions of national identity. As Walter Sauer has highlighted, the putative lack of colonial involvement provided a means whereby Austrians could distinguish themselves from Germans, even into the mid-twentieth century.¹⁰ For non-German-speaking Habsburg subjects, long used to seeing themselves as colonized by the Vienna administration, it was difficult to

³Walter Sauer, "Habsburg Colonial: Austria-Hungary's Role in European Overseas Expansion Reconsidered," *Austrian Studies* 20 (2012): 5–23. See, more recently, Sauer, "Nichts als Liebe zur Forschung selbst? Sammeln im kolonialen Kontext: Implikationen für eine aktuelle Museumspolitik," in *Das Museum im kolonialen Kontext: Annäherungen aus Österreich*, ed. Pia Schönberger (Vienna, 2021), 63–80, see esp. 64.

⁴Jan Kočvar, "Rakousko-Uhersko a Boxerské povstání," in *Zdvořilý nezájem: Ekonomické a politické zájmy Rakousko-Uherska na Dálném východě 1900–1914*, ed. Aleš Skřivan (Prague, 2014), 102–25.

⁵See, for example, Wendy Bracewell and Alex Drace-Francis, eds., *Under Eastern Eyes. A Comparative Introduction to Eastern European Travel Writing on Europe, 1550–2000* (Budapest, 2008); Dorota Wojda, *Polska Szeherazada: Swoje i obce z perspektywy postkolonialnej* (Kraków, 2015); Jitka Malečková, "The Turk" in the Czech Imagination (1870s–1923) (Leiden, 2020); Dagnosław Demski and Dominika Czarnecka, eds., *Staged Otherness: Ethnic Shows in Central and Eastern Europe, 1850–1939* (Budapest, 2021); Katarzyna Deja, *Polski Japonizm Literacki, 1900–1939* (Kraków, 2021); Mariusz Kalczewiak and Magdalena Kozłowska, eds., *The World beyond the West. Perspectives from Eastern Europe* (Oxford, 2022); Jitka Malečková and Markéta Křížová, eds., *Central Europe and the Non-European World in the Long 19th Century* (Berlin, 2022).

⁶On the question of colonial innocence see Filip Herza, "Colonial Exceptionalism: Post-colonial Scholarship and Race in Czech and Slovak Historiography," *Slovenský národopis* 68, no. 2 (2020): 175–87.

⁷Mirjam Dénes, Györgyi Fajcsák, Piotr Splawski, and Toshio Watanabe, eds., *Japonisme in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy* (Budapest, 2020).

⁸Sarah Lemmen, *Tschechen auf Reisen: Repräsentationen der außer-europäischen Welt und nationale Identität in Ostmitteleuropa 1890–1938* (Cologne, 2018). See also, Lemmen, "Travelling Second Class: Czech Tourists between National Identity and Europeaness in Cairo, 1890s–1930s," *Journal of Tourism History* 15, no. 1 (2023): 3–19.

⁹Nathaniel D. Wood, "Vagabond Tourism and a Non-colonial European Gaze: Kazimierz Nowak's Bicycle Journey across Africa, 1931–1936," *Journal of Tourism History* 14, no. 3 (2022): 291–314.

¹⁰Sauer, "Habsburg Colonial."

accept that they, too, might have been beneficiaries, even agents, of colonial inequality and exploitation, even where many welcomed colonialism as a necessity.¹¹ Equally, however, examination of individual cases reveals the situation to have been fraught with ambiguities and contradictions, and it is possible to view with some sympathy the attempt to resist unnuanced critiques of Habsburg and Central European colonialism.

To address the issue in more detail, this article focuses on one particular case study, the scholar of Islamic culture Alois Musil (1868–1944) as an illustration of the conflicting and contradictory attitudes and motivations of figures who were deeply enmeshed in the European colonial world but who, equally, were not its unambiguous agents. Musil is remembered primarily for his “discovery” of the eighth-century palace of Qusayr ‘Amra in Jordan, and he played a significant part in the reassessment of the development of early Islamic art. He is of particular interest as a subject of detailed study because he was a Czech-speaking native of Moravia, a Habsburg subject who gained prominence in Vienna before 1918, but who then played a leading role in oriental scholarship in Czechoslovakia in the 1920s. He was thus a remarkable figure, for he ended up being a key personality in two entirely different (and opposed) regimes. What makes him a particularly fruitful subject of study for this discussion is the fact that he was as active after 1918 as before. He therefore casts invaluable light on the issue of coloniality in Austria-Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Examination of the character of scholarly commentary on him is also revealing and acts as a prism through which one can observe persistent attitudes about Czech and Austrian national identity.

Moravia—Arabia Petraea—Vienna—Prague

A second cousin of the novelist Robert Musil, Alois Musil was born in the small Moravian village of Richtersdorf (now: Rychtářov) on the outskirts of Vyškov (near Olomouc) to a Czech-speaking farming family in an area that was heavily populated by German speakers. After attending a local primary school, he enrolled at the archiepiscopal seminary in Kroměříž, completing his studies there in 1887. He then studied theology at the University of Olomouc, where he finished (and was ordained) in 1891. He subsequently took up a post as a Catholic priest in Moravská Ostrava, a neighborhood in the industrial city of Ostrava. Musil’s background and trajectory might have suggested that he would remain a provincial cleric. However, he continued his theological studies at Olomouc and was awarded a doctorate in theology by the university in 1895. Afterwards, he spent two years at the École Biblique et Archéologique in Jerusalem to deepen his knowledge of Hebrew and Arabic, and to gain a deeper sense of the culture and history of Palestine. In 1897, he pursued a year of further study at the Jesuit St. Joseph’s University in Beirut.

It was during these years that he began traveling extensively around Palestine, Sinai, Transjordan, and what is now Iraq. His initial impetus was provided by scholarly curiosity. As he later stated in a lecture reflecting on his career:

In reading the Hebrew records in places referred to in the Bible I was ... learning to pay attention to practical details that never enter one’s mind at the study desk Then I got an idea that biblical books were written by the people for the people, and first of all for their contemporaries ... so I began to think that the present inhabitants, belonging to the same Semitic race, living and acting in the same region with the same climate and conditions of life, think and feel fundamentally the same

¹¹Most notoriously, the explorer Emil Holub, who traveled around southern Africa in the 1870s, had no compunction in declaring the necessity of colonial rule, for “[t]he Hottentots, Griquas and Korannas may perhaps not inaptly be compared to children that allow themselves to be attracted by anything that amuses them, and clutch at whatever takes their fancy ... before they can be held entitled to the ordinary rights of citizenship they must be cultivated to receive correct views about labour, capital and wages ...” Holub, *Seven Years in South Africa*, trans. Ellen Frewer (London, 1881), I, 444. First published in Czech as *Sedm let v jižní Africe* (1880).

way as did their ancestors. Thus, I began to interest myself in the mental activity of the present inhabitants, their folklore, and economic and ethnographic questions.¹²

The emphasis here on the idea of racial continuity was common in the late nineteenth century and will warrant further discussion later in this article. However, the most important aspect of this testament is that it explains how Musil turned from being a traditional biblical scholar to a much more engaged traveler and explorer of the Middle East. He never lost his calling as a theologian and priest, but his interests expanded to encompass ethnography, archeology, ancient and Islamic history, and cartography. Indeed, the latter proved to be one of his most lasting achievements. The regions he traveled in were almost entirely uncharted, and so between 1896 and 1898, he set about systematically mapping them. This was quite remarkable given that when it came to map-making, Musil was an autodidact.¹³ It was only later that he took a course in cartography at the Imperial Cartographical Institute in Vienna, and the Institute provided him with a trained assistant to help prepare the maps for publication (they were eventually published, with extensive commentary and accompanying volumes, in 1907–8).¹⁴

His most spectacular early achievement was the “discovery” of Qusayr ‘Amra, an abandoned eighth-century summer palace of caliph Walid II (743–44 CE), some 80 kilometers to the east of Amman. The palace is now recognized to be of singular art historical importance; it contained frescoes of nude female figures that completely overturned orthodox views of the supposedly non-figurative, morally rigid, nature of Islamic art, and it continues to be the subject of lively debate.¹⁵ Musil’s discovery was timely, for it came at a moment when art historians in Austria-Hungary were engaged in an often tense debate regarding the art of the late Roman Empire and the transition from classical to post-classical, Byzantine, and Islamic culture. The topic had a particular resonance in Vienna, where it had become a proxy for debates about the fate of Austria-Hungary, and it underpinned, too, challenges to the eurocentric orientation of art history and archeology.¹⁶

When he initially reported his findings to the Imperial Academy of Sciences in Vienna in 1898, experts in the field, such as Josef Karabacek, professor of Oriental History, met them with disbelief. Musil had no visual documentation of the imagery and his account contradicted what was then believed about early Islamic art. However, he persuaded the Academy (as well as the bishopric of Olomouc) to fund a second expedition in 1900, when he took large numbers of photographs and presented them to the Academy in 1901. This time his claims were accepted, and the Academy supported a further trip the same year, when Musil was accompanied by the artist Leopold Alphons Mielich, who was commissioned to record what they found. His discovery was later published in a lavishly illustrated two-volume edition that included an account of his travels as well as analyses of the architecture, the physical state of the frescoes and an art historical discussion of the style of the imagery.¹⁷

¹²Alois Musil, “Jak jsem poznával Orient” [How I came to know the Orient], Inaugural University Lecture, 11 February 1920, Prague. Translated excerpt in Jan Rypka, “Alois Musil: June 30th 1868—June 30th 1938,” *Archiv Orientální* 10, no. 1–2 (1938): 1–34, here, 5–6.

¹³Michael Weigl, “Out and About in Northern Moab: Alois Musil’s Exploration of the Wâdi at-Tamad Region,” in *Alois Musil: Antika a české země*, ed. Stanislava Kučová, Patrik Libal, and Martina Veselá (Prague, 2018), 35–60.

¹⁴Alois Musil, *Arabia Petraea* (Vienna, 1907–8).

¹⁵The palace was the subject of extensive study afterwards: Oleg Grabar, “Ummayyad Palaces Reconsidered,” *Ars Orientalis* 23 (1993): 93–108; Martin Almagro, Luis Caballero, Juan Zozaya, and Antonio Almagro, *Qusayr amra. Residencia y baños omeyas en el desierto de Jordania* (Madrid, 2002); José María Blázquez Martínez, “La herencia clásica en el Islam: Qusayr ‘Amra y Quart alHayr al-Garbi,” in *Europa y el Islam*, ed. Gonzalo Anes Alvarez de Castrillón (Madrid, 2003), 45–142; Garth Fowden, *Qusayr ‘Amra: Art and the Umayyad Elite in Late Antique Syria* (Berkeley, 2004); Claude Vibert-Guigue and Gazi Bisheh, *Les peintures de Qusayr ‘Amra: Un bain omeyyade dans la bâdiya jordanienne* (Paris, 2007); Nadia Ali, “The Royal Veil: Early Islamic Figural Art and the Bilderverbot Reconsidered,” *Religion* 47, no. 3 (2017): 425–44.

¹⁶Suzanne Marchand, “Appreciating the Art of Others: Josef Strzygowski and the Austrian Origins of Non-Western Art History,” in *Von Biala nach Wien: Josef Strzygowski und die Kunstwissenschaft*, ed. Piotr Otto Scholz and Magdalena Anna Długosz (Vienna, 2015): 257–86; Matthew Rampley, “Between East and West,” in Rampley, *The Vienna School of Art History: Empire and the Politics of Scholarship, 1847–1918* (University Park, PA, 2013), 166–85.

¹⁷The details are outlined in H. Müller, “Vorwort,” in Alois Musil *Kusejr ‘Amra* (Vienna, 1907), I, i–x.

The narrative Musil provided for the publication on Qusayr ‘Amra betrayed his wider interests. For although it included a description of the palace and of how he came to find it, as well as a discussion of the historical background, he also often wandered off into ethnographic observation. Much of the text consists of description of local Bedouin customs and practices, including transcriptions of the music and text of folk songs he heard while there. This was consistent with his earlier view, namely, that by immersing himself into the contemporary society and culture of the Bedouins, he would gain greater understanding of the historic lands that interested him as a theologian.

His growing reputation earned him an appointment as a professor of theology at the university in Olomouc in 1902, but he quickly became a figure of national importance and in 1909, after publication of the volumes on *Arabia Petraea* and *Qusayr ‘Amra*, he was awarded a professorship at the University of Vienna.¹⁸ This was no small achievement. In 1905, the Czech art historian Max Dvořák had been appointed adjunct (*ausserordentlicher*) professor at the university, causing an outraged reaction from German nationalists who objected to his accent and to the very fact that a Czech could occupy such a position.¹⁹ Musil faced no such opposition, and even more so than Dvořák, he became absorbed into the Habsburg intellectual and social establishment. Moreover, the cartographic skills that had been evident in *Arabia Petraea* gained him international attention; in 1910, he was commissioned by the Ottoman government to undertake a geological and hydrological survey of the areas bordering the recently completed Hejaz railway connecting Damascus to Medina. However, more significant was the invitation in 1912 to join Prince Sixtus of Bourbon and Parma, brother of Princess, later Empress, Zita, on what was ostensibly a hunting expedition to northern Syria and Mesopotamia, but one that later became a scientific expedition.²⁰ Traveling across a region that was beset by conflict between different tribes and groups, Sixtus found himself in a dangerous situation and it was only due to Musil’s fluency in Arabic and his familiarity with local culture that they were able to negotiate a safe return to Vienna. His role in this episode brought him close to the imperial family and he became the confessor to the future Empress Zita.

In 1914, on the outbreak of World War I, he was dispatched by the Habsburg authorities to northern Arabia and Mesopotamia to ensure that the local rulers would remain loyal to Ottoman rule, at a moment when France and Britain were sending emissaries with entirely the opposite objective. Musil was an obvious choice, although he had severe misgivings about the enterprise.²¹ Not only did he have extensive local knowledge, but he had also cultivated friendly relations with local dignitaries and rulers during the previous two decades. Czech biographers have made much of the fact that he was accepted as a member of the Ruwallah tribe of northern Arabia, with the name Sheikh Músa ar Rueili.²² The Habsburg strategy became increasingly pressing, as the British, and especially T. E. Lawrence, succeeded in peeling off the loyalties of the Bedouin inhabitants of Arabia and in chipping away at Ottoman control of the Arabian Peninsula. In 1917, promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Field Marshall, Musil was sent again to the Arabian peninsula, and while he may have persuaded the Ruwallah not to rise up against their Ottoman rulers, it was not enough to prevent the ultimate failure of the mission.

¹⁸Musil published a number of biblical guides and commentaries in Czech including *Starozákonní studie a drobné příspěvky k výkladu Písma svatého* [Old Testament studies and various contributions to the interpretation of the Holy Scripture] (Brno, 1902); *Od stvoření do potopy* [From the creation to the flood] (Prague, 1905).

¹⁹Rampléy, *The Vienna School of Art History*, 65–66.

²⁰The expedition is described in Alois Musil and Prince Sixtus de Bourbon, *In Nordostarabien und Südmesopotamien: Vorbericht über die Forschungsreise 1912* (Vienna, 1913).

²¹On his involvement in the war, including discussion of Musil’s reservations, see Sean McMeekin, “An Austrian in Arabia,” in *The Berlin Baghdad Express: The Ottoman Empire and Germany’s Bid for World Power* (Cambridge, MA, 2010), 153–65. See also, Karel Jordán, “Za císaře pána a jeho rodinu ...” [For the emperor and his family] in *Dobrodružství jménem Orient: Karel May, Alois Musil, T. E. Lawrence, snílci, vědci, bojovníci* [The adventure with the name of the Orient: Karl May, Alois Musil, T. E. Lawrence, dreamers, scholars, warriors] (Prague, 2018), 139–45.

²²Oldřich Klobas, *Alois Musil zvaný Músa ar Rueili* (Brno, 2003); Kristýna Košutová, ed., *Šejch Músa, aneb, Prof. Alois Musil* (Prague, 2015).

Musil's inability to intervene successfully in the Ottoman Empire was followed by what for him was a much more catastrophic event: the defeat of Austria-Hungary and its subsequent collapse. He had been closely associated with a regime that had been completely discredited and, with the creation of new national states, he was presented with further difficulties. The culture of mourning over the loss of the Habsburg Empire has been exhaustively documented, but Musil faced an additional obstacle: citizenship laws passed by the new Austrian Republic sought to make a new ethnically homogeneous state. In principle, in the first peace treaties after 1918 that governed questions of citizenship in the successor states, it was enough to demonstrate residency in the territory of a particular state to claim citizenship there. However, a clause stated that if one also had the right to residence (*Heimatrecht*) in one of the other former crownlands of the Habsburg Empire, one was automatically considered a "foreigner" and therefore not entitled to Austrian citizenship. As Hannelore Burger has pointed out, this provision was used in particular to enable the exclusion of Jews from Galicia and elsewhere in the empire (the so-called "Ost-Juden"), even if they had been long-term residents in Vienna and other cities in Austria.²³ Yet it affected members of all minorities, like Musil, who were entitled to residence and citizenship in the place of their birth (in Musil's case, Czechoslovakia). As a result, "the dream of making ethnically inclusive new states out of the Habsburg rubble failed."²⁴

Exceptions could be made to this rule. Max Dvořák was permitted to stay despite being a native of Bohemia, but it appears that the University of Vienna, for reasons that are not clear, did not have a similar enthusiasm for Musil. As a result, he was deemed a "foreigner" and was compelled to leave his position.²⁵ A potentially difficult situation was relieved by the intervention of President Masaryk, who invited him to Prague, with the support of Rudolf Dvořák, professor of oriental languages at the Czech University of Prague. Hence, Musil moved to Prague and succeeded Dvořák (who died in 1920), retaining the professorial chair until retirement in 1938. His activities in the postwar period were not pioneering in the way that his cartographic and archeological expeditions of previous decades had been, yet he was no less energetic. He was one of the key figures involved in the establishment of the Institute of Oriental Studies in 1922. Indeed, as Adéla Jůnová Macková has demonstrated, Musil played a crucial role in gaining sufficient funds from the government to provide a viable future for the Institute.²⁶ It would eventually become internationally recognized for the importance of its work, especially following the 1929 launch of its journal the *Archiv Orientální* (The Oriental Archive).

Conscious, perhaps, that he had moved from the imperial capital of one of the great European powers to a middle-sized state that was little known internationally, its main languages even less well known, he set about disseminating his work by publishing a series of books in English in the United States. This included numerous trips across the Atlantic, where he cultivated relations with the wealthy Chicago-based businessman, Charles Crane.

Crane had extensive interest in Arabic culture and society, and, having briefly served as an ambassador for the United States, he was a member of the Inter-Allied Commission on Mandates in Turkey (also known as the King-Crane Commission), which was concerned with arrangements for the former Ottoman territories of the Middle East after 1918.²⁷ What was of equal relevance was the fact that Crane was a marked Slavophile. Having first been interested in Russian culture in the late nineteenth century, Crane had met Tomáš G. Masaryk in 1900 in Chicago and then also become a supporter and

²³Hannelore Burger, "Theorie und Praxis von Heimatrecht und Staatsbürgerschaft in der Ersten Republik" in *Heimatrecht und Staatsbürgerschaft österreichischer Juden: Vom Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts bis in die Gegenwart* (Vienna, 2013), 132–40.

²⁴Dominique Kirchner Reill, Ivan Jeličić, and Francesca Rolandi, "Redefining Citizenship after Empire: The Rights to Welfare, to Work, and to Remain in a Post-Habsburg World," *Journal of Modern History* 94, no. 2 (2022): 326–62, here 327.

²⁵On the University of Vienna during the transition from Austria-Hungary to the Republic of Austria, see Mitchell G. Ash, "Die Universität Wien in den politischen Umbrüchen des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts," in *650 Jahre Universität Wien – Aufbruch ins Neue Jahrhundert*, vol. 2, *Universität, Politik, Gesellschaft*, ed. Mitchell G. Ash and Frederick Stadler (Vienna, 2015), 29–174, see esp. 73.

²⁶Adéla Jůnová Macková, "Alois Musil and the Oriental Studies Fellowships in the 1920s," *Annals of the Náprstek Museum* 41, no. 2 (2020): 3–15.

²⁷Andrew Patrick, *America's Forgotten Middle East Initiative: The King-Crane Commission of 1919* (London, 2015).

patron of numerous Czech cultural activities.²⁸ In particular, he was known as a tireless supporter of the painter Alfons Mucha. Masaryk, who had first encountered Musil in 1889, introduced him to Crane in 1922, and the American donated some \$25,000 to support publication of six volumes, under the aegis of the American Geographical Society, that recapitulated and expanded Musil's original research material that had been published in German before World War I.²⁹ The first volume, on the Northern Heĝáz, was published in 1927, and it was followed by others on Northern Arabia, the Middle Euphrates, the Arabian peninsula, Jordan, the Negev desert, and an ethnographic study of the Ruwallah.³⁰ After these, he began publishing a series of semi-fictionalized Czech-language accounts of his travels in the Middle East for children, with dramatized titles such as *For the First Time in the Desert* (1932), *In the Shadow of the Crusaders' Castle* (1935), and *On Horseback and by Camel* (1936).³¹

Musil's final project was publication of a series of eleven books on different territories in South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, under the title "The Orient Today" (*Dnešní orient*). Amongst others, they covered India, Iran and Afghanistan, Turkey, Palestine, and Ethiopia.³² They all adhered to the same basic format: a sketch of the religion, culture, and demography of the territory in question, followed by a historical outline. The decision to write books on places that had been outside the scope of his prior research was informed by his understanding of the purpose and mission of the Oriental Institute and of "oriental studies" more generally. Many of the scholars associated with the Oriental Institute were concerned with the ancient cultures of the ancient Near East—perhaps the most famous was Bedřich Hrozný, who played a major role in deciphering the Hittite language—and the issues of *Archiv Orientální* were mostly populated with articles on the distant past. Musil, in contrast, saw "oriental studies" as an instrument of the state. Accordingly, it should be concerned with providing information about political, social, and economic conditions in North Africa, the Middle East, and South and Central Asia, to identify diplomatic and commercial opportunities for the new Czechoslovakia.³³ He first laid out this vision for the discipline in an article on the subject he published in 1919, and the later book series was a continuation of that idea, for both were marked by a particular interest in the present.³⁴ The historical outlines, for example, which usually occupied half of each volume, typically focused on events over the past 100 years, in which was included a study of the impact of European colonialism. Even the titles, with the word "modern" (*nový*) featuring in most of them, signaled this interest and in 1935, after the first two volumes on the Arabian Peninsula and Abyssinia had appeared, Musil delivered a lecture, later published as a self-standing booklet, on the geopolitical issues surrounding Asia and the Middle East.³⁵

²⁸Norman E. Saul, *The Life and Times of Charles R. Crane, 1858–1939: Businessman, Philanthropist and a Founder of Russian Studies in America* (Lanham, MD, 2013).

²⁹Saul, *The Life and Times of Charles R. Crane*, 223. See also, Pavel Žďárský, "The Journeys of Alois Musil after 1918: From the Desert to Jungle [sic] of Big Cities," in *Czechoslovakia in the Orient, the Orient in Czechoslovakia*, ed. Adéla Jůnová Macková and Libor Jůn (Prague, 2022), 117–34.

³⁰Musil, *Northern Heĝáz: A Topographical Itinerary* (New York, 1923); Musil, *Northern Arabia* (New York, 1926); Musil, *Middle Euphrates* ((New York, 1927); Musil, *Arabia Deserta: A Topographical Itinerary* (New York, 1927); Musil, *Palmyrena: A Topographical Itinerary* (New York, 1928); Musil, *Northern Neĝd, A Topographical Itinerary* (New York, 1928); Musil, *Manners and Customs of the Rwala Bedouins* (New York, 1928).

³¹Alois Musil, *Poprvé v poušti* [In the desert for the first time] (Prague, 1932); *Ve stínu křižáckého hradu* [In the shadow of the crusaders' castle] (Prague, 1935); *Na koni a na velbloudí* [On horseback and by camel] (Prague, 1936).

³²Musil, *Pod Himalajemi: Nová Indie* [Under the Himalayas: new India] (Prague, 1936); Musil, *Země Arijců: Nový Iran, Nový Afganistan* [Land of the Aryans: Modern Iran, modern Afghanistan] (Prague, 1936); Musil, *Most do Asie; Nové Turecko* [A bridge to Asia: modern Turkey] (Prague, 1940); Musil, *Zaslíbená země: Nová Palestina* [The promised land: modern Palestine] (Prague, 1937); Musil, *Stará Etiopie, Nový Sudán* [Historic Ethiopia, modern Sudan] (Prague, 1941).

³³For a sketch of the Institute as Musil envisioned it see Hana Navratilová and Roman Mišek, "Alois Musil and the Rise of Czech Oriental Studies: A Perspective of a Non-Classical Orientalism," *Archiv Orientální* 70, no. 4 (2002): 558–64.

³⁴First appearing in two parts in the journal *Naše doba* [Our Times] in 1919 and 1920, it was then published as a pamphlet as *Naše úkoly v orientalistice a v Orientě* [Our tasks in oriental studies and in the Orient] (Prague, 1920). On Musil's conception of oriental studies see Adéla Jůnová Macková, "Alois Musil and the Oriental Studies Fellowships in the 1920s," *Annals of the Náprstek Museum* 41, no. 2 (2020): 3–15.

³⁵Alois Musil, *Dnešní Orient v politice světové* [The Orient today in world politics] (Prague, 1935).

Musil did not entirely give up embarking on expeditions to the Middle East, but age and failing health increasingly restricted him only to writing. After retirement in 1938, and especially after the 1939 Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia, he withdrew from public life and moved to a farmstead he had purchased in the village of Otryby, some 60 kilometers south-east of Prague, where he lived out the remaining years of his life until his death in 1944.

From Habsburg Subject to Czechoslovak Citizen

Such are the basic events of Musil's life. The question remains as to how to interpret them in relation to the initial question of Habsburg and post-Habsburg colonial involvement. We can approach this initially by considering the question of his identity as a Czech-speaking subject of the Habsburg Empire. He has been understandably commemorated in the Czech Republic, but it is misleading to identify him primarily as a Czech.³⁶ Indeed, there is little evidence that, until 1918, he saw himself as anything other than as a *Habsburg* subject. It is in this light that subsequent Austrian commentators have also tended to see him, showing little interest in his identity as a Czech. The first major German-language study of Musil, referring to him as Musil of Arabia, by analogy with T. E. Lawrence, treated his career after 1918 as a postscript of minor significance.³⁷ Other studies by Austrian authors have likewise displayed little concern with his activities in the interwar period.³⁸

This pattern reflects ongoing contemporary biases—a recent anthology of essays on Musil leaves it to Czech contributors to comment on his life and activities after the collapse of Austria-Hungary. Yet this historiographical omission in fact contains a kernel of truth as it reflects the fact that Musil was first of all a Habsburg subject who was then forced to negotiate his place in the political landscape of the postwar era.³⁹ In this context, one can contrast him with Rudolf Dvořák, his predecessor as chair of oriental languages. For Dvořák played a significant role in the development of the Czech-language university, set up in 1882, serving as Dean of the Faculty of Arts and then, later, as rector of the whole institution. With the university being one of the foci of Czech-German conflict in the late Habsburg Empire, it was a politically charged role. The University of Prague had a number of notable scholars of Asian and Near Eastern cultures, but they all spoke German.⁴⁰ Although he also wrote academic studies in German, Dvořák was one of the first to publish scholarly texts and articles in Czech and he saw it as his task to promote Czech culture and to educate the broader Czech-speaking public.⁴¹ He became an active figure in Czech public life, delivering popular lectures, publishing newspaper articles, and contributing to that key patriotic work of Czech public enlightenment: *Otto's Scientific Encyclopedia*.⁴²

³⁶Recent literature on Musil includes Jordán, *Dobrodružství jménem Orient*; Jaroslav Franc, *Kněz a teolog Alois Musil: příspěvek k dějinám mezináboženských vztahů a výbor z pozůstalosti* [Alois Musil the priest and theologian: a contribution to the history of interwar relations and a selection from his *Nachlaß*] (Olomouc, 2015); Jan Grisa and Tomáš Pavlíček, *Alois Musil: prameny k životu a dílu* [Alois Musil; sources on his life and work] (Prague, 2022).

³⁷Erich Feigl, *Musil von Arabien: Vorkämpfer der islamischen Welt* (Vienna, 1985).

³⁸Karl J. Bauer, *Alois Musil: Wahrheitssucher in der Wüste* (Vienna, 1989); Udo Worschech, *Alois Musil: ein Orientalist und Priester in geheimer Mission in Arabien 1914–1915* (Kamen, 2009).

³⁹See Benedikt Josef Collinet, Ludger Hiepel, Martina Veselá, and Michael Weigl, eds., *Alois Musil: interdisziplinäre Perspektiven auf eine vielschichtige Persönlichkeit* (Münster, 2021).

⁴⁰Petr Hlaváček, “Pražská německá orientalistika za ‘dvořákovských’ časů” [German-language oriental scholarship in Prague during the ‘Dvořák period’] in *Ex oriente lux: Rudolf Dvořák (1860–1920)*, ed. Olga Lomová et al. (Prague, 2020), 65–80; Jana Ratajová, “Oriental Studies at the Faculty of Arts of the German University in Prague,” in *Czechoslovakia in the Orient, the Orient in Czechoslovakia*, ed. Jünová Macková and Jün, 23–46.

⁴¹See, for example, Rudolf Dvořák, *Čína Konfucia život a nauka*, 2 vols. [The life and teaching of Confucius of China] (Prague, 1887–89); Dvořák *Čína: popis říše, národa, jeho mravů a obyčejů* [China: a description of the kingdom, the nation, its manners and its customs] (Prague, 1900); Dvořák *Dějiny mravouky v Orientě* [A history of morals in the Orient] (Prague, 1904).

⁴²Jan Otto, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, and K. B. Madl, eds., *Ottův slovník naučný* (Prague, 1888–1909).

Dvořák is now little remembered but he was a prominent figure in the modern Czech cultural and political renaissance.⁴³ When we consider the example of Musil, however, it is clear that not all Czechs were committed to the nationalist project of revival. In one sense, his attitude seemed to exemplify the idea of “national indifference” that has been coined to explain the values of those who remained immune to the siren calls of nationalist ideologues.⁴⁴ However, as Maarten van Ginderachter has pointed out, for all its importance and value as an “antidote” to methodological nationalism, this concept itself creates a binary division between nationalism and non-nationalism that simplifies the complex (and sometimes contradictory) attitudes that individuals held.⁴⁵ After 1918, Musil threw himself into advancing the interests of Czechoslovakia, and there is nothing to suggest that this was merely a pragmatic adaptation to circumstances. He had been an admirer of Masaryk, for example, since 1889, when the two had first met. Nevertheless, all the while the Habsburg Empire was in existence, Musil clearly identified himself with the imperial regime. Whereas most members of the Czech social and cultural elite sought to distance themselves from Austrian involvement in World War I, for example, Musil became ever more drawn in, and his failures in the Middle East left their mark. He remained cynical about his antagonist, T. E. Lawrence, dismissing the latter’s achievements, stating, “[h]e gained followers not by his personality but by gold. They abandoned him when the gold flow stopped. He never learned Arabic, as is evident from his books.”⁴⁶ When Musil wrote an obituary for Lawrence in 1935, he was equally critical. Regardless of whether his attitude was motivated by personal resentment or lingering sense of loyalty to the old regime, Musil showed no indication that he saw his new identity as a Czechoslovak citizen as a liberation from Habsburg oppression. Indeed, even though Masaryk had invited him to Prague in 1918, his appointment as professor there was opposed by Otakar Srdínko, a representative of the Republican Party of Farmers and Peasants (Republikánská strana zemědělského a malorolnického lidu, RSZML) who would briefly serve as Minister of Education in the mid-1920s. Musil’s crime was that

he supported Austria by the publication of various writings ... he was a Turkish general and he fought against us ... his scholarly qualifications are acknowledged, but alongside qualifications, a professor needs to have moral character, and I say no thanks to the acquisition of such a person with no character, who knew nothing about the Czech nation until the very last minute, and then declared himself for it just now.⁴⁷

The suggestion that by serving the Habsburg monarchy Musil was fighting “against” the Czechs was, of course, absurd, but it drew attention to his associations with the *ancien régime*.

Yet what is the relevance of such reflections to the question explored by this article? First of all, as a loyal Habsburg subject, who aligned his own activities with the priorities and outlook of the imperial administration, the fact that he was a Czech-speaker provides no grounds for treating him differently from any self-declared Austrian. Indeed, one can go further and argue that while he was active in promoting the interests of Czechoslovakia after 1918, he did so by trying to affect a *continuation* of practices and outlook of the prewar Habsburg state. His involvement in the founding of the Oriental Institute in Prague is an instructive example of this phenomenon, for as Pavel Žďárský has noted, an important model for the Institute was the Imperial-Royal Academy for Oriental Languages in Vienna.⁴⁸

⁴³Olga Lomová, “Mezi Orientem a probuzením českého národa,” [Between the Orient and the awakening of the Czech nation] in *Ex oriente lux: Rudolf Dvořák (1860–1920)*, ed. Lomová et al., 13–46.

⁴⁴Tara Zahra, “Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis,” *Slavic Review* 69, no. 1 (2010): 93–119.

⁴⁵Maarten van Ginderachter, “Possibilities and Pitfalls of the Concept of National Indifference,” *Nations and Nationalism* 29, no. 3 (2023): 831–36.

⁴⁶Musil, quoted in Theodore Procházka, Sr., “Alois Musil vs. T. E. Lawrence?” *Archiv Orientální* 63 (1995): 435–39, here, 438.

⁴⁷Otakar Srdínko, 34th Session of the National Czechoslovak Assembly, 27 February 1919. <https://psp.cz/eknih/1918ns/ps/stenprot/034schuz/s034004.htm> (accessed 15 November 2023).

⁴⁸Pavel Žďárský, “Alois Musil jako zakladatel československé orientalistiky – ve službách republiky” [Alois Musil as founder of oriental studies in Czechoslovakia – in the service of the Republic], *Nový Orient* 69, no. 1 (2014): 54–60.

The Academy had originally been set up by the Empress Maria Theresa to service the needs of Austrian diplomacy, and this intertwining of politics and scholarship intensified throughout the following century and was given added impetus in 1873 by the Vienna World Fair, often seen as a watershed of global commercial and diplomatic engagements on the part of the Habsburg Empire. For the first time in the history of the world fairs, there was official representation on the part of numerous states beyond Europe, including Tunisia, Persia, Siam, China, Japan, “Turkey,” and Morocco.⁴⁹ Interest in their participation in the fair prompted the founding of the Oriental Museum in Vienna in 1875 and, in 1886, the Oriental Institute of the University of Vienna was also established, its annual journal, the *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* (*Vienna Journal of the Orient*) published for the first time the following year. The fair and the museum catered to an aesthetic curiosity on the part of the public in “exotic” artifacts and images; with the founding of the Institute, there was a significant growth in scholarly research, too, into “oriental” cultures. However, they were also informed by sober commercial, diplomatic, and political calculation. In 1887 the museum, for instance, was renamed the “Museum of Trade” (*Handelsmuseum*), and its journal, which continued to be published into the 1920s, comprised mostly trade and industrial reports. Austria-Hungary had no direct overseas colonial commitments, but it had wider global interests, and these initiatives were meant to identify economic opportunities.

It is against this background that we should understand Musil’s ambitions for the Oriental Institute in Prague, for he was clearly advocating a comparable approach to the model he was familiar with in Vienna before 1914. Hence, he asked in his pamphlet on the field of oriental studies, why should not Czechs and Slovaks have the same ambitions as the British, the French, and the Belgians? The “Orient” was a field of opportunities: “Interest in the Orient should be cultivated not only by a few orientalists in arts faculties, but also by other professors in other faculties, technical, academies of trade and commerce.”⁵⁰ Furthermore, he added, as it grows economically, the Orient will require experts:

Large and wealthy cities in the Orient will have need of proper doctors. Agricultural reform won’t take place without agronomists. The Orient does not have roads, railway lines, mines, furnaces for smelting various ores, it needs engineers. Individual cities need sewage and sanitation systems to be installed ... they are setting up banks, commercial centres etc ... Why shouldn’t our people go there? All that is needed is good preparation, a persistent appetite and a little courage.⁵¹

Jůnová Macková suggests that this was primarily a strategic move designed to persuade politicians of the potential returns that might be generated by funding for the Institute, and this is true to some extent.⁵² However, it is striking that Musil paid little heed to prevalent ideologies of Czechs as the “little nation,” a trope that underpinned commonly-held ideas of national identity, and which was popularized even by Masaryk.⁵³ Instead, in a confident assertion of the capacities of Czechoslovak statehood, he drew comparison with the larger European colonial states, paralleling the significant global diplomatic and commercial ambitions of the new Republic, from the activities of companies such as Škoda and Baťa to the energy with which it participated in world fairs across the globe in the decades after 1918.⁵⁴ This expansive vision, adopted by Musil, represented the carrying over of an outlook from the earlier pre-1914 period. This does not mean that Musil had fallen prey to the Habsburg-era nostalgia that beset so many of

⁴⁹ *Welt-Ausstellung 1873 in Wien: Officieller General-Catalog*, 2nd ed. (Vienna, 1873), 647–768.

⁵⁰ Alois Musil, “Naše úkoly v orientalistice a v Orientě,” 8–9.

⁵¹ Musil, “Naše úkoly,” 9–10.

⁵² Jůnová Macková, “Alois Musil and the Oriental Studies Fellowships in the 1920s,” 3–15.

⁵³ One of the last publications by Masaryk was *Problém malého národa* [The problem of a little nation] (Prague, 1937).

⁵⁴ For a brief sketch of Czechoslovak policies in relation to the Islamic Middle East see Adéla Jůnová Macková, “Výpravy do neznáma? Českoslovenští vědci v orientu” [Expedition into the unknown? Czechoslovak scholars in the Orient] in *Českoslovenští vědci v orientu*, ed. Macková, Hana Navrátilová, Lucie Storchová, Hana Havlůjová and Libor Jůn (Prague, 2012), 33–50. See also, Tara Zahra, “The Air Is Our Ocean: Zlín 1931,” in *Against the World: Anti-Globalism and Mass Politics between the World Wars* (New York, 2023), 190–207.

his Austrian contemporaries; his recommendations were based on a level-headed assessment of the present. Nevertheless, it suggested that he envisioned a future for Czechoslovakia that would not have been so different from one imagined for the Habsburg Empire.

There was another example of this phenomenon within the Oriental Institute, namely, Bedřich Hrozný, who, in 1929, was even criticized for not being global enough in his ambitions. Specifically, he became entangled in a public argument with Antonín Frinta, a *docent* of comparative Slavic philology at Charles University, over issues of language. The journal, *Archiv Orientální*, had just begun publication and Frinta criticized it for the fact that the languages of the journal were only French, German, and English. He called for it also to include articles written in Czech and Russian. Hrozný's answer was emphatic: neither language (and he added Italian to the list, too) was a language of world scholarship. Articles in Russian, Czech, or Italian would restrict the readership of the journal, since many would not be able to understand them.⁵⁵ If the Institute and its journal wished to be a recognized participant in international scholarship, German, French, and English would be the only languages of publication.

Hrozný may have been correct, from a purely pragmatic point of view, but his comments went against the grain of much contemporary Czech academic life, when his peers were publishing in Czech as an exercise in national consciousness-raising. At a time when, in the wake of the Great Depression, barriers were being erected across the world, Hrozný's sentiments seemed to evoke an entirely different world. Throughout the nineteenth century, scholarship on the ancient languages and cultures of Asia had been dominated by the great European states: France, Britain, and, until 1918, Germany and Austria-Hungary. Hrozný's reply was an act of acquiescence to academic *realpolitik*, but the fact that he chose to accept the hegemonic status of French, German, and English may be taken as a signal that, in important respects, he was still trying to continue that prewar world.

The Question of Orientalism

Examination of Musil's example highlights the fact that the transition process from the Habsburg Empire to the national successor states was complex and often beset by internal contradictions and tension. This relates not only to the political uncertainties and false starts that were characteristic of the period immediately after 1918 but also to the ambivalent attitudes many Czechs may have harbored toward the changing sociopolitical landscape. Musil's activities in the Middle East, acting as an agent for Habsburg imperial interests also raises questions about his stance toward European colonialism.

On the one hand, he was a trenchant critic of colonialism; in the books in the series "The Orient Today," he was unsparing in his attacks against European colonial interventions. In *Under the Himalayas: The New India* (1936) the target of his polemic was Britain.⁵⁶ India had been, he argued, one of the wealthiest places on earth, but under British rule it had been allowed to decline, its industries becoming diminished as the London government sought to protect production at home.⁵⁷ Local traditions of schooling were eradicated by the imposition of English as the language of education, and he pointed out that even where Indians sought to emulate British educational culture and practices—a classic case of colonial mimicry—they were still subject to discrimination. Indian university qualifications were deemed of lower value, and qualified Indians who traveled to Britain in search of professional employment faced hostility or indifference.⁵⁸ While in theory, British rule was based on a meritocratic

⁵⁵Bedřich Hrozný, "O jazyku naší jediné orientální revue" [On the language of our unique oriental review] in *Bedřich Hrozný: texty a přednášky. Archeologické expedice a lingvistické objevy předního českého orientalisty* [Bedřich Hrozný: texts and lectures. The archeological expeditions and philological discoveries of the foremost Czech scholar of the orient], ed. Šárka Velhartická (Prague, 2022), 370–73.

⁵⁶Musil, *Pod Himalajemi: nová Indie* (Prague, 1936).

⁵⁷Ibid., 91–96.

⁵⁸Ibid., 105–16.

system, Indians were excluded: “A declaration of Queen Victoria in 1853 promised Indians access to all offices of state. This was far from the reality.”⁵⁹

In his accounts of Palestine and Sudan that were published in separate volumes he was no less sparing in his commentary. In both, he pointed to the cynical machinations of the British government deployed to extend its writ across Africa and the Middle East.⁶⁰ This commentary could be attributed, perhaps, to a lingering resentment due to his wartime experiences, yet in a further volume on Italian-run Libya and Ethiopia, he was equally critical of the colonial efforts of the Italian “imperialists” (*imperialisté*). Not only were the Italians ill-suited to colonizing, he argued (“Good intentions are not enough; diligent hands are also necessary. The colonizers consider themselves to be lords and have no appetite for work”),⁶¹ but they also had a negative impact on local civil society. Any but the most basic schools for inhabitants of Libya had been abolished, the old Tripoli school of art and design founded in 1899 had been turned into an orphanage.⁶²

Given the close relations Musil cultivated with the Ruwallah and other tribes, which were genuine friendships not rooted in a merely instrumental view of what was necessary to enable him to achieve his goals, it seems a straightforward task to exempt him from the charges of colonial complicity that have so often been levelled at Europeans operating in the Islamic world. It is certainly the case that he was deeply absorbed by Bedouin culture, rooted, among other things, in a shared religiosity. Yet exclusive focus on his personal motivations potentially misrepresents what is at stake. Edward Said’s original analysis of orientalism was not concerned with differentiating between “good” and “bad” orientalists, but rather with highlighting the fact that European study of the “Orient” was embedded in an apparatus of knowledge rooted in asymmetries of power.⁶³ Said’s study has itself been questioned, and not only on the part of those who have sought to defend European “orientalizing” practices. His vague definition of “orientalist” and the huge (a)historical sweep of the examples cited (from ancient Greece to the present), have, it has been argued, blunted the force of his analysis.⁶⁴ At the same time, while authors critical of him may have identified certain flaws, they have done little to discredit the underpinning logic of his argument.

How is this relevant to Musil? Some ten years ago Gebhard Selz, professor of Oriental Studies at the University of Vienna, insisted that Musil should not be ranked alongside the “orientalists” discussed in Said. The reason, he argued, was that Musil developed such close personal ties to the Ruwallah Bedouins. Although he had no explicit method, he could be described as implicitly adopting the place of the *participant observer* (although this is not a term that Selz used) and this absolved him of the kind of charge levelled at others.⁶⁵ Other commentators have made similar observations, emphasizing the title of Sheikh Músa that Musil was given by the Ruwallah tribe.⁶⁶ Indeed, it was due to his close personal relations that Musil was deemed the ideal person to lead the Habsburg effort to counter the work of Lawrence of Arabia. Musil capitalized on this. Later, in correspondence with František Drtina, head of finance of the Czechoslovak Ministry of Education he signed himself the “Czech Bedouin.”⁶⁷

⁵⁹Ibid., 161.

⁶⁰Musil, *Zaslíbená země: Nová Palestina*, 129–217; Musil, *Stará Etiopie, Nový Sudán*, 137–68.

⁶¹Musil, *Itálie v Africe: Nová Libye, Italská Východní Afrika* (Prague, 1939), 90.

⁶²Ibid., 95.

⁶³Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London, 1977).

⁶⁴Ibn Warraq, *Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said’s Orientalism* (New York, 2007); Robert Irwin, *Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and its Discontents* (New York, 2006); John M. McKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (Manchester, 2011).

⁶⁵Gebhard Selz, “Der Orientalist Alois Musil: Anmerkungen zu einem impliziten Forschungskonzept,” in *Gedenkschrift für Mark A. Brandes (1929–2011)*, ed. Karin Stella Schmidt (Münster, 2015), 247–68.

⁶⁶Oldřich Klobas, *Alois Musil zvaný Músa ar Rueili* [Alois Musil, known as Músa ar Rueili] (Brno, 2003); Vyškov Museum, *Alois Musil a jeho odkaz: sborník z konference k 150. výročí narození Aloise Musila konané v Muzeu Vyškovska dne 17. října 2018* [Alois Musil and his legacy: proceedings of the conference on the 150 anniversary of Alois Musil, held in the Museum of Vyškov, 17 October 2018] (Vyškov, 2018).

⁶⁷Alois Musil, *Korespondence Alois Musila III: Alois Musil a špičky ledovce v moři politickém Republiky československém* [The correspondence of Alois Musil III: Alois Musil and the tip of the iceberg in the sea of politics in the Republic of Czechoslovakia] ed. Adéla Jünová Macková, Pavel Žďárský, Iveta Cichrová (Prague, 2019), 156.

Yet no matter how impressive his ability to forge personal connections with the Arabs of Jordan and northern Arabia, Musil was in many respects not so different from the typical European “orientalist” described by Said, and bears comparison with Lawrence of Arabia or, indeed, with slightly younger figures such as Wilfried Thesiger (1910–2003), renowned for his immersion in the culture of the marsh Arabs of Iraq. Such men were products of an imperial age. Their fascination with Bedouin culture was itself a symptom of a metropolitan disaffection that led so many Europeans to identify with the cultures of the Islamic Middle East, India, colonial Africa, Japan, and China. Moreover, for all his fascination with the peoples of Palestine, Syria, and Arabia as the racial descendants of the inhabitants of the biblical world, Musil adopted an *instrumental* attitude toward them. They were to be bargained with and appeased, to reach the ultimate goals: preventing British ambitions, upholding Ottoman rule, and maintaining the strategic interests of Austria-Hungary.

In his correspondence with Drtina he argued, too, that the Arabs were “not ready” for political independence, and that they should find some foreign power to govern them “at least in the beginning.”⁶⁸ This casts his comments on British and Italian colonialism in a new light, for his objection was not to colonial rule per se, but rather to the specific manner in which the British and Italians had colonized India and North and East Africa. That Musil was not a single-minded critic of colonialism is indicated, too, in a public lecture he delivered in 1934 on “The Orient Today in World Politics,” at the time that he was also publishing his book series with the same title.⁶⁹ The lecture offered a brief sketch of European colonial ventures in Asia over the past century and a half, with a particular focus on the previous thirty or so years. While he spends some time discussing rival ambitions of the European powers toward the post-Ottoman mandates in the Middle East—a discussion in which the wishes of the inhabitants are singularly absent—Musil then, surprisingly, devotes a significant portion of the text to British India. In particular, he sketches out the measures adopted by the British government to stymie Indian efforts at securing some kind of independence or, at least, relative autonomy from British rule. One issue he touches on is the Community Award of 1932, a measure introduced by the government of Ramsay MacDonald to extend the Indian electorate to all classes, but it also granted statutory recognition (and hence voting rights) to the population based on religion. It was steadfastly opposed by Gandhi and the Congress Party, and his decision, and the meaning of the Award, have been debated ever since.⁷⁰ For Musil its intention was clear, namely, to fragment Indian society: “In order to appease the imperialists and to make creation of a united India more difficult ... the Communal Award ... split the population into religious and interest groups ... How will a united nation be formed if strong religious and interest fences are added to the bulging fences of caste?”⁷¹ And yet, while he used the derogatory term “imperialists” several times in reference to the British, he still subscribed to a civilizational hierarchy.

He concluded the lecture with discussions of the growing power of Japan in the 1930s, a turn of events that had concerned Britain to such an extent that it was building up Singapore as a major fortress to prevent the expansion of Japanese militarism. “Fear of the Japanese is partly to the advantage of the British. In New Zealand and Australia the centrifugal forces have almost entirely disappeared. In India, prudent patriots ask with horror how they would fare if, from servitude under the white Europeans they came under the yoke of the yellow mongols.”⁷² Speculating on the vulnerability of the Soviet Union to Japanese aggression, he noted that if the British and Americans did not come to its aid, “it will succumb, Mongol hordes will once again flock to the West and who knows where they will stop in Europe.” Indeed, he concluded, it was fear of the Japanese that had led Muslims in Asia to cling to European rule.

⁶⁸Ibid., 155.

⁶⁹Alois Musil, *Dnešní Orient v politice světové* (Prague, 1935).

⁷⁰For a sketch of the debates over interpretation of the Award and Gandhi’s motives see Sujay Biswas, “Gandhi, Ambedkar and British Policy on the Communal Award,” *Studies in People’s History* 5, no. 1 (2018): 48–64.

⁷¹Musil, *Dnešní Orient v politice*, 17.

⁷²Ibid., 18.

Quite apart from the overt racism of his description of Japan as a kind of yellow peril, it is striking that he sees that there may be, after all, some benefits to European colonial rule. Indeed, in his 1920 paper on the future of oriental studies in Czechoslovakia, Musil argued for its importance by relying on one of the most common colonial tropes of all: that of the civilizing mission. Czech and Slovak technical experts, he argued, had a great future in exporting their expertise to underdeveloped states and territories. Implicitly, a priority was to ensure that they did not lose out to their professional colleagues and competitors of the established European imperial states.

Finally, it is worth returning to the issue that first brought him to wider public attention in Austria: the palace of Qusayr 'Amra. Although Musil is recognized in Europe as its discoverer, the palace was, as Shahzad Bashir has pointed out, well known to locals, and it had evidently been used through the centuries as a place of shelter and refuge.⁷³ Some of the images had been obscured by smoke residue accumulated through that time as well as by graffiti from visitors that documented their presence. It was, moreover, nearby residents who had first taken Musil to the palace, yet Musil, for all his apparent absorption in the local culture, showed a striking lack of curiosity in what it meant to them. He merely stated that they avoided it through fear of being possessed by ghosts.⁷⁴ On his own admission, too, one of the most important frescoes of the palace, depicting a number of rulers (it is now known as the Fresco of the Six Kings) paying homage, was damaged when Musil cut out sections of the wall and took them to Vienna. Other parts suffered harm when he and Mielich tried to clean the fresco but could not finish the task, leaving them for local herdsmen to pick at out of curiosity.⁷⁵ A further fragment is now in the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin. One can see here a familiar phenomenon: enthusiasm on the part of a European scholar for the art of some or other non-European culture, coupled with a sense of *entitlement* that makes it acceptable to acquire tokens of that culture and “safeguard” it for scientific purposes.

Conclusion

There is no question that Musil was an admirer of Bedouin culture (and of other cultures of the Islamic Middle East), and that he was also often sensitive to the ways the peoples of colonial territories were treated by European imperial powers, in particular, Britain. It is precisely for this reason that he is a figure of such interest. For despite his avowed sympathies, his attitudes were not always so distinct from the kind of orientalist scholar that Edward Said analyzed in his pioneering work. Examination of Musil also draws attention to the fact that Czechs, for all their putatively subordinate status, were not immune to holding attitudes and assumptions associated with European imperialism. In addition, his activities took place in a political context that was framed by the fact of European colonial power. Scrutiny of his work after 1918 indicates a continuation of many of the attitudes that underpinned the ambitions of Czechoslovakia between the wars, and this indicates the extent to which the elites of the First Republic harbored ambitions that could be traced back to a culture cultivated in the Habsburg Empire. This casts into doubt the ideas of colonial innocence and exceptionalism that have persisted up to the present. But it is important not to treat this discussion as a performative exercise in denunciation, as if merely to emphasize that Czech society, too, was involved in the European colonial project. For its aim has not been to weigh up the tenability of such exceptionalist notions, or, indeed, of the decolonial critiques that have come increasingly to the fore. Nevertheless, I have tried to suggest that Musil requires a more analytical approach, in place of the largely celebratory or merely descriptive accounts that have characterized most of the literature on Musil, especially in Austria and the Czech Republic. In that sense, this article set out

⁷³Shahzad Bashir, “Frescoes in the Desert: Alois Musil and the Rewriting of Islamic Pasts,” *The MIT Press Reader* 9 August 2022. <https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/frescoes-in-the-desert-alois-musil-and-the-rewriting-of-islamic-pasts/> (accessed 14 December 2023).

⁷⁴Musil, “Die Auffindung von kusejr Amra,” in *Kusejr 'Amra*, I, 69.

⁷⁵Musil, *Arabia Deserta*, 334–35, cited in Garth Fowden, *Qusayr 'Amra: Art and the Umayyad elite in late antique Syria*, 11–12.

with the modest goal of interrogating the grounds on which claims to exceptionalism have so often been formulated, seeking to highlight the ambiguities and contradictions that beset any debate over Habsburg and post-Habsburg entanglements in colonialism.

Funding information. This article was supported by funding from the Czech Grant Agency for the EXPRO project Czechs and the Colonial World, Design and Visual Culture since 1848 (Grant number: GX25-15630X).

Cite this article: Matthew Rampley, “Alois Musil (1868–1944), the Moravian Lawrence of Arabia: The Question of Coloniality in Central Europe,” *Austrian History Yearbook* (2025), 56, 99–113. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0067237825000025>