Deak on Miller and Morelon, 'Embers of Empire: Continuity and Rupture in the Habsburg Successor States after 1918'

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Sir Lewis Namier’s entry in Harold Temperley’s mammoth-sized History of the Paris Peace Conference—a publication which deserves its own study—treats the Habsburg Empire’s war and collapse. Namier had spent the war years working in British propaganda in the Foreign Office, publishing books on the Central Powers with books like Germany and Eastern Europe (1915) and The Czecho-Slovaks, an Oppressed Nationality (1917). Namier expounded on themes that became the bedrock of historical interpretations of the Habsburg Monarchy—most importantly, the idea that the Habsburg Empire was a prison of the peoples that did not allow the proper historical development of its “subject nationalities,” undergirded by a host of other assumptions. But, it was also in this essay, descriptively titled, “The Downfall of the Habsburg Monarchy,” that those assumptions about the history of the monarchy met the new system embodied in the peace conferences of Paris. For Namier’s article on the collapse of the empire is mostly devoted to prologue. The empire lost its legitimacy and right to exist before the war began. The final moments in November 1918 are covered in a minimalist fashion, taking up little more than a page in an article that spans almost sixty. In a sense, the new nation-states that emerged from the land empires of East and Central Europe received a past that was easy to ignore. They emerged newly born from the old empires, unencumbered or even unconnected to the recent past, free to make their own path in the new world.

The book under review here takes a much different approach than what Namier offered. Much of this comes from the fundamental revision of histories of the Habsburg Empire that have taken place in the past four decades. If the empire was not necessarily a prison of the peoples, but a viable and reforming polity, what does that mean for the successor states that emerged in the crucial years following 1918? Armed without the assumptions that guided Namier and other historians of the interwar period for so long, the essays in this volume emphasize the continuities between the empire and the successor states of Central Europe and therefore help us in the process to rethink “the chronologies of the turbulent twentieth century in East Central Europe, where dramatic regime changes have long hid important continuities on the individual, local, and even state levels” (p. 7).

There are fourteen pieces in this volume, including an introduction (Claire Morelon) and an afterword (Pieter Judson). The introduction ably sets out the goals of the volume, pushing our scholarly assumptions beyond the lost cosmopolitanism of writers like Stefan Zweig or Josef Roth, and instead examining the “often obscured more latent continuities in everyday life” in the successor states to the
empire (p. 1). Essential here is the idea that the revision of the empire’s history, and the relative success and stability of the empire’s institutions, means that we need to no longer accept the larger assumptions of the successor states’ official histories, which have “downplayed or ignored” the continuities between the empire and the successor states themselves (p. 2). In other words, as states like Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Poland, and even Austria hoped to present their independence as a fundamental break with the past, there are important legacies and continuities that historians need to interrogate. Moreover, although the international system treated Austria and Hungary as the region’s sole defeated powers, the other states, too, had various Habsburg legacies that they had to deal with.

These things are now brought into focus in the present volume. The twelve main articles in this volume are grouped into three parts. The first part, “National Politics in the Transition to the Successor States,” contains strong contributions by Gábor Egry and Morelon. Egry’s chapter on “local societies and nationalizing states” asks what happened at the local level during the revolutions of 1918. Examining municipal politics during the transition in Transylvania and Slovakia, Egry shows that the new nation-states had to import and enforce their ideological norms on local politicians, elites, and citizens. In fact, at the local level politicians seemed more than willing to step across ethnic and linguistic divides to work together on issues of economics and security. Moreover, the assumptions of local people in Transylvania and Slovakia/Northern Hungary that they would be living in Hungary (not an expanded Romania or new state of Czechoslovakia) shows that people often enough did not greet 1918 as a liberation point. In fact, it was only when central representatives from Bucharest and Prague were sent to these localities that these avenues for ethnic cooperation were shut down and suppressed by agents equipped with a new, nationalizing ideology. Morelon’s chapter on the 1918 transition in Prague builds nicely on Egry’s piece, using a local perspective to show how the revolution in Prague shows us much in the way of continuities between the new and old regime. In fact, Morelon shows how there was even an increase in the number of street protests in Prague after the so-called revolution, which was more symbolic than substantive. Again, as in Egry’s chapter, material conditions are the key. The legitimacy of the new regime was not self-evident to Prague’s citizens and a Czech nation-state was not automatically more accepted because it was a national entity. It needed to provide security and avenues for prosperity. And what is more, the pronouncements of the Czechoslovak state, which sought legitimacy in a Western, liberal, and democratic vein, actually gave legitimacy to all types of protest, which this chapter presents in numerous well-picked anecdotes. The remaining chapters of the section are less broadly conceived, but nonetheless interesting to specialists. Iryna Vushko’s chapter on Leon Biliński, who served Austria-Hungary as joint finance minister at the start of the First World War, shows how the transition for elite experts from empire to nation-state was anything but easy or straight. It is telling that Biliński, who vigorously defended the Polish state’s financial interests vis-à-vis its neighbors in its transition to independence, moved back to Vienna after leaving his cabinet post. Marta Filipová’s article on exhibitions in Austria-Hungary and Czechoslovakia shows how these showcases worked in symbols and self-presentation. And while postwar exhibitions in Czechoslovakia worked to distance themselves from the messages of the empire’s exhibitions, the scripts of exhibitions were already forming under the empire.

Part 2 of this volume examines the Habsburg military and military culture in the transition to the successor states. Richard Bassett’s piece on the legacy of the Imperial and Royal Army offers a more optimistic picture of the Austrian military achievements in the First World War. It provides anecdotes of generals and officers making their way in the world of the successor states that are both
interesting and enjoyable. But when reading the next article by Irina Marin on Habsburg Romanian officers and their transition to the Kingdom of Romania, one in which the army seemed less open and less victorious, one has a sense that we are reading about a different military. Marin provides equally enlightening color on officer schools and officer training and how Habsburg military schools created Romanian officers who were educated and thus patrons of Romanian cultural and intellectual development. Superior Habsburg training made these officers a natural fit for military leadership in interwar Romania, where the army needed to be rebuilt and reformed after its disastrous entry into the First World War. Not that these Habsburg officers were immediately accepted by their fellow Romanians. A final article in the section by John Paul Newman showcases how Croatian officers in the new SCS-state had to adapt to a new, Serbian-dominated ideological reading of the past. These officers, forced to celebrate their losses in the new state, turned to national opposition against the emerging Yugoslav regime. This culture of defeat within the SCS-state would have massive repercussions for the Balkan theater of the Second World War.

Part 3 of the volume contains three articles on the “Postwar Fate of Imperial Pillars.” Michael Carter-Sinclair examines (and sharply criticizes) the Austrian Catholic clergy for their less-than-total acceptance of democratic ideas. And while this is true, the refusal of Catholic leaders to embrace democratic processes was tied to the immediate Austrian context—a context that is not offered here: the carriers of democracy in postwar Austria were the members of the Austrian Socialist Party, who worked to weaponize the ballot. Konstantinos Raptis provides a fascinating and well-done chapter on the grand nobility of the Habsburg Empire. Focusing on the Harrach family, which had large land and business holdings that extended across new borders, Raptis tells us how the landed nobility had to adapt to a new international system, new states, and new laws and taxes that complicated their ability to make money and persist as elites. Of course, they were well placed to make this transition, but they had to work at it nonetheless. Land reform, which broke up large holdings and sold them to landless peasants, also threatened their status as crème de la crème. Families followed different strategies, sometimes maintaining an international cosmopolitanism or embracing a national identity. But, as Raptis ably shows, the path into the new era was far from straight for any of them. Finally, Christopher Brennan provides an article on the Austrian Republic and the death of the last emperor, Karl I. There too, the transition away from the empire was not complete. In fact, the death of Karl worked to deepen the political divides in postwar Austria and brought Austria’s fractured understanding of its own past and present once again into the light.

Brennan’s chapter offers a nice transition to the final part of the book, “Processing the Empire’s Passing.” Here we see the various constellations that memory of the war experience could form in the interwar period. Christopher Mick examines two different war memorials in Austria, with their meanings contested by the various camps (socialist, nationalist, Catholic-conservative). Again, as in John Paul Newman’s piece, the culture of defeat plays a role here, shaping how different factions tried to make sense of their present and Austria’s status as an uncertain nation-state in a quickly changing and increasingly dangerous state system. Paul Miller’s piece on Franz Ferdinand brings out the tropes and silences regarding the future emperor who never became emperor. What did his death mean? A lost chance? A terrible war? A new beginning? Franz Ferdinand’s assassination has been constructed and reconstructed in all of these ways.

Pieter Judson’s short and compelling afterword brings the volume to a conclusion, noting that these essays “argue that we should look beyond nationalist assertions about the postimperial world in order
to recapture both the contemporary and historic legacies of the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy” (p. 321).

As a whole, this book largely succeeds in complicating our views of the postimperial transition. Berghahn has likewise done an able job putting the book together. In fact, the book seems designed for scholars and students to pick and choose the chapters to read, with full endnotes and bibliographies appearing at the end of each chapter. When one reads the work as a whole, two features seem to stand out. First, the essays show all together us how people had to adapt to a new world order of nation-states and how that adaptation was neither assured nor completely accepted by people in their everyday lives. Moreover, the importance of material well-being and security were paramount. The empire’s multinational past and its relatively greater economic opportunities in comparison with interwar Europe offered a challenge to the legitimacy of these successor states and their nationalizing ideologies, something that Dominique Reill’s latest work on Fiume/Rijeka also shows.[1]

But even more striking is how the articles differ, sometimes widely, on their own assumptions, lines of interpretation, and presentation of events. In addition to offering differing impressions of the Habsburg military and military culture, they make obvious that the transition looked differently depending where one was. Moreover, the national assumptions of each of the successor states vis-à-vis the Habsburg Empire and its legacies were also varied, influencing how each scholar approaches and speaks to a nationally bounded historiography. Finding lines of commonality or ways to integrate these new revisionist narratives is still a desideratum. This book gives us an able starting point on which to build new scholarship and continue conversations with one another that enliven and enrich our understanding of a complicated and difficult past.

Note


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