Online Conference: "Habsburg Civil Servants: Beyond the State Apparatus"

Announcement published by Alexander Maxwell on Friday, January 14, 2022
Type: Conference
Date: January 28, 2022 to January 30, 2022

The Antipodean East European Study Group at Victoria University of Wellington and the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences invite you to a conference!

During the long 19th century, the Habsburg civil service grew steadily. The swelling ranks of clerks, inspectors, tax collectors, military recruiters, census-takers, policemen, judges, cartographers, sanitation officials, telegraph operators, and other minor officials did not form an entirely homogenous social group, differentiated as they were by educational attainment, region, rank, and status. They nevertheless formed an important social collective, characterized above all by literacy, but also by novel habits, values, cultural practices, and novel social circumstances.

The administrative apparatus helped bring all imperial citizens together in a common society. Their role in embodying and personifying the state at the local level proved especially crucial on various imperial peripheries, where civil servants formed the main link between villages or small towns with the imperial centre. Civil servants also represented progress, introducing into relatively isolated rural communities secular morality, hygiene, science, and myriad other social and cultural transformations sometimes collectively denoted as “modernity.” Like other middle-class professionals, they formed and joined associations, societies and social clubs, promoting charitable causes, local development, and other various causes imagined as conducive to the public good. As lobbyists for local causes, furthermore, they encouraged local particularism, spread patriotic sentiment, thus contributing to centrifugal political movements. Thus even as civil servants symbolized imperial loyalty, renouncing personal interests to support the state, they proved indispensable to the establishment of civil society, a force which successfully contested imperial absolutism, and contributed to the ultimate downfall of the monarchy.

Their complex role thus raises interesting questions that call for further investigation. Where did their loyalties actually lie: with the emperor, with the state, with their church, with their social class, with their particular Crownland, or with their imagined national community? To what extent did they obey the government’s directives, and alternatively to what extent did they attempt to modify, resist, evade, or subvert their instructions? Did they contribute, intentionally or unintentionally, to the spread of nationalism, or to alternate loyalties? What roles did they play in the monarchy’s social dramas, both in their working hours and when off duty? What were the cultural consequences of their unique role? How were they presented in journalism, belles-lettres, theatre, or other literary genres?
To explore such issues, Alexander Maxwell and Daša Ličen are planning first an online conference on 28-30 January. The event is jointly hosted by the Antipodean East European Study Group at Victoria University and the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Arts and sciences. We hope it will be an interesting event!

Speakers are affiliated with the University of Vienna, the German Historical Institute in Warsaw, the University of Notre Dame, Yale, CUNY-York College, Babes-Bolyai University, LMU in Munich, the University of Illinois, the University of Melbourne, University of Graz, Victoria University in Wellington, Central European University, and the European University Institute in Florence.

A full list of speakers is available from the conference programme, available here or here.

There is no fee to attend, but participants and audience members must register. Your email will not be added to any mailing list.

We hope to see you there!

Contact Info:

Alexander Maxwell - Victoria University of Wellington
Daša Ličen - Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts

Contact Email:
alexander.maxwell@vuw.ac.nz