

Rethinking the Postwar from Above and Below: 1918-1923

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This conference may possibly be the last of the many centenary conferences we have experienced over the past six years. As I look at this program, I am convinced that we have already moved well “beyond Trianon” (or Paris) in several ways. The topics and approaches on this program are not what we would have seen a few years ago. Only a decade ago as we approached the centennial of the First World War, historians of Europe might have viewed many of these investigations as “interesting but marginal studies of peripheral regions.” Their value might have been seen as “primarily local,” not typically European, and their results would not have changed how we understand the main questions of European history in the post-war period. In those days too, historians had more difficulties overcoming a binary approach to questions of breaks and continuities, of which Julia Bavouzet spoke so effectively today.

Today we can see these studies in a very different light. Today their significance is more central to our comprehension of the twentieth century in Europe and the world. We also see these studies as profoundly European and not as somehow peripheral. In part this is because these studies question some of the most comfortable traditional categories and narratives that framed the way this period was generally understood. The program of this conference asks different questions and offers creative approaches. I hope that this work will influence national institutions, national conversations, and pan-European debates.

One hundred years later, ethnically-defined nations often remain the building blocks of history on whose foundation rest the legitimacy of today’s nation states. Public, political, and state discourses continue to uphold these ideas as the basis for historical research. Even before the Paris peace treaties were signed, contemporaries understood their significance in terms of the unquestionable rights of ethnic nationhood to political statehood, whether observers believed that the treaties upheld or denied those rights. Later historians interpreted the entire series of events at the end of the war in Central and Eastern Europe in terms of the political emergence or persecution of ethnic nations. Empires collapsed, it was believed, because they could no longer manage (or oppress) the many nations within their borders. Wartime defeat of empires combined with national revolts to produce nation states that constituted the end of history, its telos.

A rhetoric of international politics and diplomacy, from the United States to the Soviet Union, (from Lenin to Wilson), largely drove this nation-based understanding of events. Opportunist politicians quickly learned to frame their territorial demands in terms of national rights, rights justified by loose references to popular opinion, democracy, and to the wartime sacrifices allegedly made by whole nations. Activists outside of Europe from Egypt to China used this popular rhetoric to lodge their own anti-colonial demands. Thus in public discourse nations (rather than states or people) became the privileged subjects of history. National emancipation legitimated the emergence and aggrandizement of successor states and those with irredentist claims.

For a long time, historians struggled to relate coherently the social demands of a war-weary populace to the national demands of their politicians. To put it very crudely, history from above told a story of inevitably emerging nation states, while history from below told stories of wartime suffering and social upheaval. When these stories were connected to each other, it was often in instrumentalist terms: social unrest and the dangers of Bolshevism could only be mitigated by national independence. What drove most approaches to these events was the retrospective knowledge of the outcome that became the foundation of today’s political order (and that order must be maintained). How can we escape the burden of the successor states when we examine this period? Can we determine how contemporary people interpreted their changing circumstances and how they sought to gain control over them? How did people at

many levels of society, from elites to professionals, artisans, peasants, industrial workers or veterans, how did they seek to influence events following the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy by acting as agents to shape their own futures? This remains an enormously important field for historical inquiry, and it is a subject many of us have investigated.

Now, if we want to change a historical narrative, we face several challenges. The most difficult is how to argue against an older narrative without reinforcing it by using its logic and resorting to its categories? How to argue with the old, without confirming the logic of the old? Some of my work tries to challenge nationalist narratives by asking questions that relativize the idea of nation, questions that avoid making national communities into the subjects, actors, or building blocks of history. But I worry that in the end this work produces even more talk about nationhood. Nevertheless, for me it is people, their networks, their movements, their social organizations, and their use of existing institutions that are the preferred subjects and agents of history; not nations. I do not deny the occasional power of nationalism in people's lives. But rather than accepting it as a norm, I want to know what situations produce a nationalist response in people? And how can such a situational understanding of nationalism apply to the very different scales of analysis when we investigate individuals, organizations, institutions, or states? Social scientists may treat organizations, institutions, states as agents, but in my view they are not themselves coherent bodies, and they look different when explored at different levels and in different situations. When I look at this conference program, I see proposals that move us well beyond traditional understandings of the post-war period. I see engagement among different scales of analysis. And I see transnational and micro-historical comparisons that bring the experience of Central and Eastern Europeans more to the center of narratives about postwar Europe, rather than pushing them to the margins. And this raises yet another concern of mine. Because the conflicts generated by the political reorganization of Central and Eastern Europe after 1918 were so often expressed in terms of ethnic nationhood, historians often see nationalism as a particularly eastern problem. Some of you may recall the unfortunate debates we experienced twenty or more years ago about so-called civic nationalism in the West as opposed to so-called ethnic nationalism in the east, as if ethnic conflict were a particularly eastern problem from which this part of Europe had to recover in order to become more like the West.

That debate eventually produced a more nuanced understanding of nationalism in the west and an admission about the ways—sometimes related to colonial empires—that western nationalism too shares unacknowledged ethnic elements. I hope that we can continue to persuade our colleagues who study Western Europe, that the West is hardly a privileged site of social, political, and economic advancement, that a politics of ethnicity and national categorization is not limited to Central and Eastern Europe, and that what is called the “Wilsonian moment” often continued and strengthened imperial practices in the West and the East, and did not end them.

It is almost foolish to have to speak these points out loud to all of you. Are they not obvious? And yet, to move “beyond Trianon,” we have to articulate these points repeatedly and in new ways to skeptical and often nationalist audiences who understand the post-war period in terms of nationalist triumph or tragedy. I apologize for stating to you what must seem obvious, but I do so to emphasize the importance of your work.

In the rest of my talk I will examine further the points I have raised here so far: first, how we may use analytic strategies from below, and then from above, to arrive at a clearer understanding of how people experienced and understood the immediate post-war period. In the third place I will discuss how we are bringing West and East together more coherently, without denying the distinctiveness of experience in Central Europe.

I will start by telling two short stories that took place within a month of each other in very different settings. As you'll see, one is from below, so to speak, and one more from above.

Each story interrogates our traditional understandings of the immediate post-war. They suggest how necessary it is to bring very different perspectives together more persuasively if we are going to succeed in reframing general narratives about this period.

The first story took place in the small northern Bohemian town of *Ervěnice/Seestadt*, at the base of the Ore mountains just to the west of *Teplice/Teplitz*. On November 12, 1918, just two weeks after the proclamation of a Czechoslovak Republic in Prague, and one week after the last Habsburg Emperor stepped aside from his role in public affairs, Frau Helene Hlawatsch sent a petition to local officials. Hlawatsch, a merchant's wife, had been accused of charging an exorbitant price for some pears she had recently sold. In the context of 1918, her accusers saw this as a flagrant case of profiteering. Hlawatsch, however, energetically defended herself from these accusations. In her petition Hlawatsch explained that she had bought the pears at a price of two Krone forty, per kilo. "After she had finished sorting through the pears," she wrote, "whereby more than a quarter of them had to be thrown away because they were completely worthless and unfit for human consumption," she had charged her customers three Krone per kilo. According to her, the pears she had sold at this price were "flawless. The best and finest table pears." Hlawatsch also requested—and this is important—that in case her petition were to be denied, it should be forwarded directly to the state government. But, in late 1918, what was that state and where was its government located? Were the officials in *Ervěnice/Seestadt* supposed to forward her petition, for example, to the new Czechoslovak government in Prague? No. They were to forward it to the new government in *Liberec/Reichenberg*, the capital of another new state, this one called *Deutschböhmen* or German Bohemia. In fact, similar to the case of Helene Hlawatsch, in the winter of 1918-19 the government of *Deutschböhmen* received a flood of petitions and official complaints seeking help for a wide variety of matters. People demanded a steady supply of food and they complained about profiteers like Helene Hlawatsch. Local businesses as well as government offices demanded coal so they could continue their work in the winter. Women from border towns complained that their husbands were drafted into the military of the neighboring state of Czechoslovakia. Local town councils demanded that the government print a newspaper that could answer the allegedly pro-Czech views of the German-language newspapers in Prague. And this new government—or rather, what we might call this "continuing government"—worked diligently to answer this mail and to address the complaints and concerns of its citizens. I will return to this story in a moment to explain why it counts as more than simply an amusing local story about confusion after the collapse of the Habsburg regime.

But first I will repeat the second anecdote, one that also tells us something about how we might understand differently the processes that produced new states, new borders, new regimes, following the collapse of Austria-Hungary. This second anecdote is related by Larry Wolff in his recent book on Woodrow Wilson's discovery of and re-imagining of Eastern Europe. Wilson, as you know, never actually visited Eastern Europe. But he frequently proclaimed a profound intimacy with many of its peoples, a closeness that derived from his personal relationships with a few trusted individuals from the region, such as Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and Ignacy Jan Paderewski. Wilson's alleged expertise about Eastern Europe rested on what these men told him.

Inevitably Wilson was disappointed by his Eastern European friends and the stories they had told him about their peoples. On the one hand, thanks to their information, Wilson explained to others the procedure at Paris: that the Empire of the Habsburgs would be broken into convenient pieces that could be recombined to form the new Europe. "We are carving a piece of Poland out of Germany's side. We are creating an independent Bohemia below that, an independent Hungary below that, and enlarging Rumania, and we are rearranging the territorial divisions of the Balkan states in a new Slavic Kingdom." However, even as he crossed the Atlantic for the first time, only four weeks after Helene Hlawatsch had sent her petition to the

officials of Deutschböhmen, Wilson learned that his friends had not always given him accurate information. His picture of simple pieces fitting together in a new combination could be seriously disrupted. “What?” he supposedly exclaimed on shipboard at learning a new piece of information. “Three million Germans in Bohemia! That’s curious! Masaryk never told me that!”

From these very different stories we can derive some critical points. Thinking in terms of social history, of an approach “from below,” Helene Hlawatsch and her peers demonstrate the degree to which older institutions often remained in place after the departure of the Habsburgs. They remained because survival during a time of violence, starvation, and a pandemic, required a degree of organized stability. The story also suggests that while new national regimes were proclaimed in cities from Prague to Zagreb to Ljubljana to Budapest, many Central Europeans did not understand or experience this moment as a national revolution to create nation states. Beyond those cities, we encounter attempts to maintain local stability to allow for provisioning and public safety. That stability depended on the expertise, experience, and connections of former imperial or royal officials who often remained on the job, regardless of what nationality one might attribute to them. Local citizens looked to these officials not only for help, but also for fairness and justice. The experience of war, of food shortages, and perceptions of unequal sacrifice had badly damaged these expectations of the Habsburg regime. The alleged profiteer (like Helene Hlawatsch) remained an all-too-familiar figure in the war-weary landscape of Habsburg central Europe well after 1918. And it remained a central expectation of local officials to redress these wrongs.

The collapse of the central state and the devolution of power to regional and local officials and civic organizations produced situations for which traditional narratives about national revolution cannot easily account. In late 1918 and in 1919 these organizations often had to work together to avoid catastrophe for their town. This work often contradicted the stories of euphoric nationalist revolution later told about 1918 and 1919.

At the same time, in public statements the nationalist leaders took every opportunity to distance themselves from the dead empire. So did most socialists, democrats and liberals. Their public performances ostentatiously rejected the hated empire. However, they often distracted attention from the ways in which even the new regimes relied on imperial institutions, practices, and personnel. We all know the first law proclaimed by the new rulers of Czechoslovakia in Prague, a law that maintained existing imperial legislation. And this phenomenon was visible elsewhere. As Rok Stergar tells us in a recent essay, the inventors of a Slovene national administration in Ljubljana may have dismissed German-speaking officials. Nevertheless, the new administration “remained essentially Habsburg in its organization and procedures.”

None of this should surprise us. But there are further dimensions to these phenomena that are often lost in histories of the early post-war period. The successor states may have treated Austria-Hungary as an alien imposition against the nation, but the fact remains that many prominent nationalists had served the empire in positions of power and authority. Given the influence of nationalist parties before the War, one could argue that at least the Austrian half of the Dual Monarchy had been in part, their own creation. Nationalists had built up their influence in the crownland bureaucracies and in municipal governments. This was especially the case in the capitals such as L’viv, Prague, Ljubljana, or Trieste. It was also often the case for nationalists in Croatia. When challenged by the collapse of the Empire to create something new, these activists worked to maintain their local achievements and then later to extend them.

These considerations went beyond maintaining familiar institutional structures, and administrative or judicial practices. It included personnel as well, thanks to an urgent need for experience and expertise. Historians have demonstrated these personnel continuities in many of the successor states. Martin Klečacky shows, for example, that 56% of section chiefs

employed by the new Czechoslovak Republic in the years 1918-1921 had previously worked in Viennese ministries, while another 36% had been employed in the Bohemian or Moravian state administrations under the empire. Ivan Šedivý has shown that officials in the Czechoslovak Interior Ministry who filled the most important functions, were held over from Austria-Hungary. Samuel Ronsin has shown the same for the police force. This continuity of personnel did not go unremarked by nationalist and socialist critics of the new states. Already in December 1918 a Czech socialist periodical noted sarcastically of these formerly Habsburg officials, that the Czech nation would be “astonished” to learn how many of its members had formerly worked for Viennese ministries. Commenting on the alleged corruption of the new system, the author noted that a former “Lack of national character is amply rewarded, the gates to paradise are opened wide to the monsters of the Vienna bureaucracy.”

Another less visible form of imperial continuity was the effort made by some communities to maintain the legal privileges or economic advantages that membership in an empire had bestowed on them. After the collapse of Austria-Hungary, some local activists took drastic measures to maintain those benefits. Ivan Jeličić and Dominique Reill demonstrate from different perspectives, how local activists in Fiume sought to maintain their port city’s advantages. They believed these advantages derived from Fiume’s autonomous status within Hungary and its imperial links to international trade networks. They predicted a more profitable future for their city if it could maintain its autonomy or find a place in another significant Empire; for many, Italy seemed the best possibility. Most historians judge Fiume’s postwar story in terms of an intense nationalist conflict that overpowered other concerns. Reill and Jeličić see beyond the rhetoric of nationalism to explain Fiumean’s desires in very different terms of future economic prosperity.

Activists in other communities took similar initiatives to try to negotiate a privileged position for their members within the context of the new empires in which they found themselves. For example, the leaders of Cernvici’s (Cernauti/Czernowitz) German national community telegraphed to the new imperial metropole Bucharest, swearing loyalty to the new empire (Romania) and asking for a confirmation of their traditional rights to maintain schools and cultural institutions in their language. Their expectations for the future of their community rested on an understanding of their experience as part of an empire.

All the examples I have cited, starting with Helen Hlawatsch and her peers, argue that when viewed from the point of view of daily life in Central and Eastern Europe, the post-war transformations look much different. They effectively question the persuasiveness of traditional narratives about national revolution. And I have not even mentioned the degree to which violence and military action also shaped outcomes on the ground.

In the remaining time I want to shift focus to narratives from above, so to speak. In particular I want to ask how these narratives—starting well before 1918—created a kind of incomparability between imagined western and eastern Europes. When I say “imagined,” I do not deny that geographic, or even historical, economic, or institutional differences may characterize different regions of Europe. Instead I refer to the norms and values and even moral judgements that have been associated with an east-west divide in Europe, such as the idea that eastern Europe is overly ethnic or that western European nationalism is largely civic in its orientations. Of course this subject alone is worth several books, and I can only raise a few questions superficially here, and of course I am hardly the only historian to raise these questions.

In 1914 two Imperial governments, one located in the west of Europe and one located in the East, passed legislation granting a high degree of national political autonomy to the peoples who inhabited large territories under their rule in Europe. The forms and conditions under which political autonomy were granted were different, owing to the different constitutional systems and institutional histories of the Austrian and British empires. In the Austrian half of

the Dual Monarchy, politicians and government ministers negotiated a Settlement in the crownland of Galicia to divide political and educational functions between Polish and so-called “non-Polish” citizens along lines similar to earlier provincial Compromises in 1905 and 1910. Only a year before, comparable efforts had failed to finalize a similar compromise for the crownland of Bohemia. But failure or no, such settlements were the future for this empire. These settlements were meant to diffuse the corrosive influence of nationalist political struggles over resources in the crownlands.

A few months after the Austrian government had finalized this Galician compromise, the British parliament again passed the Government of Ireland Act,” (known more popularly as the “Home Rule Act”). This act too was meant to diffuse a long term nationalist political struggle. Both the Irish and Galician acts were suspended for the duration of the War and never went into effect. In preparing for this conference I asked myself whether the literature on these geographically distant sites—Ireland and Galicia—ever addressed each other or underwent serious comparison? The question is perhaps even more urgent when we recall that only the British empire experienced a substantial ethnic-national revolt in its European territory during the First World War, a revolt that demanded thousands of troops fortified by heavy artillery to put it down. That revolt, the “Easter uprising,” lasted for six days and produced three thousand casualties, the majority of which were civilians. If that rebellion took place in the west and not in Austria-Hungary, why is ethnic nationalism still generally understood as the defining characteristic of Central and Eastern Europe despite its history in places like Ireland or Spain?

One answer has to do with the nature of the settlement that followed the war. The victorious powers often framed their redrawing of the European map at Paris in terms of the rights of nations as a way to solve the challenges posed by the collapse of empires in the East. Only this kind of settlement, it was imagined, would create some kind of stability in the region that could also protect Europe from the emerging Bolshevik threat.

But as Larry Wolff tells us in his new book *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe*, Wilson, as I mentioned earlier, knew nothing of Eastern Europe, and depended for knowledge on his personal relationships with men like Paderewski or Masaryk. Their friendships stood for friendships among whole peoples. In the same way if a head of state annoyed Wilson it could also be dangerous. When, for example, Queen Marie of Romania kept him waiting at a lunch engagement, Wilson immediately lost sympathy for the claims of that country. An observer at the unfortunate luncheon with the Queen reported that with every passing minute he could see from the expression on the president’s face that another slice of the Dobrudja would go from Romania to Bulgaria.

Wilson did bring several College professors and researchers with him to Paris to investigate the situation on the ground in formerly Habsburg territories. But their investigations often produced more confusion when it turned out that language use or national affiliation did not necessarily determine people’s desire to live in one state or another. Their reluctant solution to the complexity they discovered was to promote the idea of minority treaties that would force the signatories not to persecute their national and religious minorities, treaties that would be overseen by the League of Nations. (Here, the League would take the place of empire and play the role that the imperial judiciary had played in Habsburg Austria.). But the great powers did not subject themselves to the conditions they imposed on the successor states with regard to treatment of minorities. When, as Tara Zahra recounts, they were challenged on this count, the French delegate to the League responded that “France has not signed any Minorities Treaty because she has no minorities. To find minorities in France, they would have to be created in the imagination.” One could argue that in one ironic sense the French delegate was correct. We often forget that immediately after the military occupation of Alsace Lorraine in 1918 France had actually expelled close to two hundred thousand people it categorized as Germans, thus engaging in a French exercise of ethnic cleansing on a scale that some regimes in Central

Europe could only dream. Nevertheless, this set of treaties rested on the unproven notion that what differentiated Central and Eastern Europe from the rest of Europe was its ethnic minorities.

The fact that the fighting did not end in 1918, has also been seen as a particularly Central and Eastern European phenomenon, a fight for succession to the empires produced after the “real war” ended. Several historians, most notably Robert Gerwarth, have for more than a decade pointed out that continued fighting and paramilitary violence after November 1918 was not a purely Central and Eastern phenomenon. From 1916 until the end of 1921 paramilitary and official military units battled in Ireland, with civilians most often the victims. And Ireland is only one of several western, northern, or southern sites from Finland to Greece that produced extreme violence—often against civilians—well into the 1920s. The most extreme such example can be found in northern Italy during the years 1919-1921. If there are useful distinctions to be drawn between western and eastern geographic regions, let us draw them on the basis of careful historical analysis, and not on the basis of national mythologies. Let us also remember how these terms have for centuries functioned more as terms of value or moral distinction, rather than as purely geographic descriptors.

I have tried to make two points with this survey “from above.” One is to urge that we continue to analyze the situations we encounter in East Central Europe in ways that make comparison with on-the-ground experiences in other parts of Europe even more normal. The other is to warn against the confusion of national statesmen and national communities with the experiences and desires of ordinary people and local communities. This confusion is often made intentionally especially by politicians who assert their legitimacy by claiming to speak for the people. We historians do not need to take them at their word.

In my talk I have ranged far. In doing so I have tried to bring into focus the many ways in which all of your work is changing our understanding of the significance and experience of the immediate post-war period. In particular I have tried to feature the many ways that this micro-historical work challenges the most durable macro-historical myths about this period, myths that are still maintained and promoted in today's nation states.

Thank you.