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Habsburg Studies under Siege: Notes on Recent Early Modern Scholarship

The Habsburg Empire under Siege: Ottoman Expansion and Hungarian Revolt in the Age of Grand Vizier Ahmed Köprülü, 1661–76, by Georg B. Michels, Montreal and Quebec, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021, 608 pp. \$85.00 CAD, ISBN 9780228006759

George Michels, professor of history at the University of California, Riverside, has written a wonderful book that, while a substantial contribution to the field of Habsburg Studies, also affords the reader a panoramic view of East Central and South-Eastern Europe in the late seventeenth century.¹ As such, it is an exemplary piece of scholarship both on account of the author's attention to a myriad of details as well as Michels' reconstruction of (Upper) Hungary's far-reaching entanglements well beyond the frontiers of the Realm of St Stephen.

The book is divided into eight chapters that meticulously reconstruct the antecedents of the tumultuous 1670s (chapters 1–3), the powder keg that was Hungary in that decade (chapters 4–7), and the eventual splintering of Habsburg authority in the years leading up to the second siege of Vienna in 1683 (chapter 8). Apart from the expectable additional information in the appendix, mention should be made of the extensive scholarly apparatus (pp. 363–535), the detailed index (pp. 573–603), and the brilliant maps, designed with great attention to detail by Deborah Lefkowitz. The volume is also richly illustrated.

The Habsburg Empire under Siege is the result of more than a decade of meticulous enquiry, sustained archival research in Austria, England, Hungary, and the Netherlands, and it constitutes an exemplary effort in terms of original research. Michels' study is based on investigations conducted by the Habsburg troops, a source category known to, but mostly ignored by, scholarship (pp. 18–22). In addition, as anyone even vaguely familiar with the history of Habsburg rule over Central and Eastern Europe knows, language issues were (are) a quite thorny issue, and this book is a significant departure from the assumed norms and scholarly expectations of the field. Furthermore, the approach – Microhistory – may be well-known, if little practised these days, with most of its practitioners known to Western scholarship focusing on Western topics. This is not to say that there exist no such works in East European Studies, but the reception of all things Eastern by Western scholarship remains, to this day, limited, to put it mildly.² Conceptually and methodically, too, Michels' volume is a milestone, in particular as the focus rests on one of area and its inhabitants that have long been held in contempt by Western scholarship, be it the characterisation as a “non-historic people” (G.F.W. Hegel) or the similarly infamous, if infused with Greater German arrogance, labelling as “small nation” (F. Engels).

Originally trained in Russian Studies, Michels' approach is very different. His book meticulously avoids any ideological pitfalls while, at the same time, he documents in no uncertain terms the plight and misfortunes suffered by ordinary individuals in a highly contested area. As such, *The Habsburg Empire under Siege* is Microhistory at its best, in particular given the trajectories of the past generation of scholarship on these matters. Hence, the volume is also both right on time and fills an important gap in the relevant literature.

Recent Trends in (Early) Modern Habsburg Studies

From its inception in the 19th century to its more recent iterations, Habsburg Studies were (are) decisively Vienna- and elite-centred. During the reigns of Leopold I (r. 1658–1705) and Joseph I (r. 1705–11), European politics witnessed the establishment of the first balance of power, which eventually lasted until the outbreak of World War I. These large-scale changes were even more drastic in (East) Central Europe: a dozen years into the reign of Charles VI (r. 1711–40), the double-headed imperial eagle cast a wide shadow from the North Sea to the heel of the Italian boot, and from the gates of Milan to the snow-covered peaks of the Eastern Carpathians, a colossus of unprecedented proportions bestrode Central Europe. Still, the standard account of these changes remains, to this day, Oswald Redlich's two-volume court-focused account, reissued fifty years ago.³

Before World War I, Austrian Historical Research (*Österreichische Geschichtsforschung*) very much followed the conceptual and ideological predispositions of its mainly German-speaking upper-class and bourgeois protagonists. Hence, it is hardly surprising that the Empire's history was portrayed as a gradual, if non-linear, expansion of central authority, brought about by increasingly close collaboration between crown, church, and estates (R.J.W. Evans), which was subsequently augmented by state activism related to the army, the bureaucracy, and the economy. From an inverse perspective, be it from Bohemia, Hungary, or elsewhere, the same developments were perceived as foreign domination that threatened to do away with the traditional rights and ancient freedoms of the estates of the various lands that constituted the Habsburg monarchy. With very few exceptions, neither of these approaches cared much, if at all, for the "common people", mainly due to the fact that the non-German-speaking historians hailed from similar class backgrounds. With very few exceptions, mainly found in materialistic scholarship, none of these traditions cared much, if at all, for commoners.

Like many other relevant, if not existential, issues pertaining to the future of Austria-Hungary, these conflicting national aspirations were never reconciled before 1914. While the dual monarchy ceased to exist four-and-a-half years later, its conflicting historiographic legacies continue to permeate scholarly debates and public (often mis-) conceptions about Habsburg rule over Central Europe. Virtually all established narratives – which rested, after all, on virtually identical *bourgeois* foundations – of Habsburg rule were carried over into the Interwar period and beyond, with the exception of the almost complete loss of status of the former ruling dynasty. All "successor states", be they (say) Czechoslovakian, Hungarian, or Yugoslav, were themselves multinational, and their elites elevated their own exclusionary national histories that farcically echoed the various 19th-century accounts of foreign domination and oppression by the dynasty's narrow-minded Catholic zealotry, albeit from an inverse perspective, but with comparable blind spots. This was as true in post-1945 Czechoslovakia (whose Communist government incorporated the legacy of *Temno* into its materialistic understanding of history⁴) as it was in Hungary whose government invoked the traditional nationalist narrative of proud resistance against foreign oppression. The situation in neighbouring Austria was different only insofar as post-1945 historiography, with precious few exceptions – apart from Redlich this refers mainly to international scholarship by, e.g., Robert A. Kann, R.J.W. Evans, and Jean Bérenger – elected to overwhelmingly ignore the roughly 400 years between the reigns of Ferdinand I (r. 1521/58–64) and World War I.⁵

With very few exceptions, and despite differing ideological convictions, post-1918 Habsburg Studies remained within the limits imposed both by pre-1914 nationalistic traditions and post-1918/45 borders. The Cold War further restricted archival access while sharply reduced reciprocal exchange and rapidly declining language competences characterised historiography *on both sides* of the Iron Curtain. In many cases, scholarship, deemed free

of both bourgeois-liberal and fascist “distortions”, often took comfort in a more remote past, be it the Golden Age of medieval Prague and the “Hussite Revolution” (František Šmahel) in the Czech case or insistence by post-1945 Austrian scholarship on emphasising the assumed continuities between the 15th-century territorial disposition of the *Erblande* and the post-1918/45 borders of the Republic. In Austria, this inward-looking perspective was buttressed by the elevation to official status of the “victim theory” (*Opferthese*) concerning Austrian involvement in World War II and supported by historians like Erich Zöllner, whose standard account was first published in 1961, with the eighth and last edition appearing in 1990, who barely, if ever, looked beyond republican borders. Similarly, the medievalist Alphons Lhotsky argued that the extent of the Habsburg lands in the early 15th century somehow prefigured the borders of the Second Republic (1945-), thereby relegating the half millennium in-between to the status of a mere “interlude” (*Zwischenspiel*).⁶ Only in Hungary, with its long tradition of anti-Habsburg resistance, did the early modern period continue to play a certain role: to shore up domestic support after the 1956 insurrection, the government removed from Budapest’s Heroes Square (*Hősök tere*) the statues of various Habsburg rulers and replaced them with famous Magyar elite patriots, including Matthias Corvinus (r. 1458–90), Gabriel Bethlen (r. 1620–21), István Thököly (r. 1682–85), and Francis II Rákóczi (r. 1704–11).

Much of Central European scholarship during the Cold War witnessed the solidification of separate and linguistically unequally received interpretations that nonetheless remained intimately connected to the various national traditions, their respective 19th-century foundations, and in their overall assessment. From its post-1918 inception, scholarship tended to ascribe moribund qualities to both the Austrian Empire (1804–67) and its Austro-Hungarian successor (1867–1918), a nearly uniform interpretation that remained in place until the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Facilitated by the end of the Cold War, this overarching interpretation was overcome in recent decades due to studies by István Deák, Pieter Judson, and others that emphasised the defunct Habsburg polity’s more positive overall qualities.⁷ While chronologically focused mainly on the second half of the 19th century, more recent scholarship is working to extend this interpretation into the early modern period as well. Therein, we can observe three main trends: first, in line with the cultural and perceptual turns of late, Vienna has been recognised as a “multiple centre” of a number of partially overlapping contexts, including the Holy Roman Empire, the Habsburgs’ possessions throughout Central and Eastern Europe, and its role as a communications hub.⁸ Second, the imperial court and its ancillary institutions, although smaller in scale and complexity than Versailles, are now considered in close relation to its European counterparts.⁹ Third, the delayed participation of Habsburg scholars in the “absolutism debate” of the 1990s and the subsequent emphasis on the particular role of the estates and their diets have re-invigorated a field of research, administrative history, that has long remained barren. This more positive assessment holds that the early modern Austrian monarchy’s successes rested on arrangements that were put into place during the late 17th and 18th centuries, and that the Habsburgs’ success (relative to France) was mainly due to increased intra-elite collaboration – against: non-elites. In other words: scholarship over the past generation has essentially refined Evans’ main arguments about Habsburg state-making while remaining focused, albeit in an increasingly exclusionary manner, on the privileged orders.¹⁰

Despite repeated criticism on such a self-delimiting conceptual approach – that, at least in the Czech(oslovakian) case predates the end of the Cold War – there are few indicators that mainstream scholarship is actually moving beyond normative and/or printed sources as well as beyond the privileged orders. Take, say, the criticism voiced by Zdenka Hledíková, Pavel Himl, and Petr Maťa among others, but there is little tangible evidence that these meta

tendencies are going to reverse themselves any time soon.¹¹ If anything, recent developments in early modern Czech scholarship are indicative of a re-emergence of both editorial undertakings and studies based on such regulatory (official) snapshots in time, according to Václav Bůžek, professor of early modern history at the University of Southern Bohemia in České Budějovice. For a recent example in the above-critiqued mold, see Jiří David's monograph on *Politics, War, and Finance* in late 17th-century Moravia, published in 2018, which was criticised by Bůžek for precisely this kind of elite bias.¹²

Microhistory and Hungary's Place in Habsburg Studies

These established traditions and more recent trends are what makes the study under discussion so important. Michels' *The Habsburg Empire under Siege* shows, beyond a shred of doubt, that the Habsburg court was very much aware of the reprehensible conduct of its forces in Hungary. This book is a timely antidote to the large, and growing, number of celebratory accounts of the early modern Habsburg empire. Speaking specifically about the crucial, if under-researched, period between the Thirty Years' War (1618–48) and the accession of Maria Theresa (r. 1740–80), a more realistic assessment of this history continues to be a desideratum of the first order. Michels' *The Habsburg Empire under Siege* will be a crucial building block, as will be Yasir Yilmaz' forthcoming account of *The Road to 1683: A New History of the Second Siege of Vienna*.

It is precisely in these much larger contexts that I think the major impact of this book will be. In uncovering the long-lost, and typically ignored, history of the dreadful misfortunes of Habsburg rule, Michels provides historians with an exemplary study of how the successful integration of “the common people” and “conventional historiography” can be accomplished. Only in doing so, scholarship may eventually progress to arrive at new insights that will challenge our current understanding by highlighting “the fragmentation, contradictions and pluralit[ies]” of what is conventionally held to be a rather “simple”, if not outright simplistic, account of the early modern Habsburg empire.¹³

Notes

1. Based on remarks delivered at the book launch convened by the Hungarian Studies Association of Canada, 29 May 2021.
2. Note, e.g., the virtual absence of “all things eastern” in Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender*, who does not mention Venice's extensive possessions in the Levant (esp, Dalmatia, Albania, Crete, and Cyprus) while Eastern Orthodoxy and the Ottoman Empire are mentioned on six and one pages respectively.
3. Redlich, *Weltmacht des Barock; Werden einer Großmacht*. Neither Winkelbauer, *Ständefreiheit und Fürstenmacht*, nor Vocolka, *Glanz und Untergang*, reach the same level. Guidance by Hochedlinger, *Austria's Wars of Emergence*, 151-202.
4. *Temno*, Czech for “darkness”, was the title of Alois Jirásek's historical novel about Jan Hus, published on the quincentenary of the Bohemian reformator's burning at the stake in Constance in 1415. On Czech scholarship, start with the essays in Teich, *Bohemia in History*, but note the absence of Moravian and Silesian perspectives, on which see Bahlcke, *Erinnerungskonkurrenz*. The standard textbook is by Pánek, Tůma et al., *History of the Czech Lands*.
5. Heiß et al, “Habsburg's Difficult Legacy;” Evans, “Remembering the Fall.”
6. On “victim theory”, based on the Allied Moscow Declarations (1943), which held that Austria was the first victim of Nazi aggression, see Uhl, “Das ‘erste Opfer’;” “Vom Opfermythos.” On its legacy, see Gerbel, “Zur ‘gesamtdeutschen’ Geschichtsauffassung.” The standard textbook

- during the Cold War was Zöllner, *Geschichte Österreichs*, 1st ed. (1961), 8th ed. (1990), now repr. (2014). Biblio-biographical information by Winkelbauer, “Erich Zöllner.” Quote by Lhotsky, “Stand der österreichischen Geschichtsforschung,” 93. This argument already appeared a few years earlier in Lhotsky, *Geschichte Österreichs*. Guidance by Heiß, “Im ‘Reich der Unbegreiflichkeiten,’” 469–76.
7. Breaking with 100 years of overwhelmingly negative assessments and building on Rumpler, *Chance für Mitteleuropa*, recent scholarship, driven in no small part by the centenary of the First World War, has increasingly emphasised the positive aspects of the late Habsburg empire. See, e.g., Judson, *Habsburg Empire*, 385–441; and Beller, *Habsburg Monarchy*, 241–72, with historiographic embedding of this shift on 15–21, incl. the above epithet. For a scholarly discussion of this shift, cf. Torrie, “An Imperial Dynamo?”
 8. Survey by Scheutz, “Metropole Wien.”
 9. Duindam, *Vienna and Versailles*, incl. the review by Klingenstein, “Zwei Höfe,” See also Duindam, “Habsburg Court.”
 10. See the essays in Maťa and Winkelbauer, *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1620–1740*, esp. the introduction (7–42). Individual territories and their estates are surveyed in Ammerer et al., *Bündnispartner und Konkurrenten*. Recent book-length studies incl. Iwasaki, *Stände und Staatsbildung*; Godsey, *Sinews*; and Maťa, “Stuben und Säle.”
 11. Hledíková, “Několik poznámek,” 572; Maťa, “Verwaltungs- und behördengeschichtliche Forschungen,” 446–7; Himl, *Die ‘armen Leüte’*, 18.
 12. For the first part of the above comment, cf. Bůžek, “Frühneuzeitliche Adelsgeschichte,” esp. 278–80. For the latter part, see David, *Nechtěné budování státu*, and the related critique in the review by Bůžek, “Nechtěné.”
 13. Levi, “Microhistory,” 107 (my modification).

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