

Transatlantic Relations and the Great War: Austria-Hungary and the United States

By Kurt Bednar. New York: Routledge, 2022. Pp. 230. Cloth \$160.00. ISBN: 978-1132064086.

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Departing from traditional historiography, this work posits that most of the diplomatic events between the United States and Austria-Hungary during the Great War could have taken alternate courses and that the dismemberment of the Dual Monarchy at the end of the conflict was not a *fait accompli*. It should come as no surprise that the relationship between the upstart democratic republic and the venerable autocratic monarchy was fraught. Neither country understood nor cared for the other. Belated inquiries and official reports made by US scholars and diplomats about the condition of the Habsburg Empire before the Paris peace talks were ignored by Woodrow Wilson. These factors, melded with the US president's hubris led the US to act "negligently against better knowledge in allowing, even encouraging, the familiar structure in Central Europe to splinter (without a trustworthy surrogate in place)" (xiii). Relations between Austria-Hungary and the United States have long been overshadowed and relegated to a back burner. Kurt Bednar seeks to refocus the narrative.

Told in five chapters, plus introduction and conclusion, *Transatlantic Relations and the Great War* begins the introduction with a discussion of the little-known and short-lived Mid-European Union (MEU). This possible successor to Austria-Hungary, conceived and birthed in America, did not even last a year, and illustrated the difficulties faced in the region after the war. The MEU faced competition from other entities and hostilities from certain Great Powers. It was thus allowed to wither and die in its infancy.

The book's first chapter is an overview of the US–Austro-Hungarian diplomatic relationship. Bednar carefully reexamines how that relationship developed from its earliest days. Although primarily focused on the years of the Great War, the book begins long before, with the period of informal relations between the two countries. Initially finding common ground in commerce, the relationship soon soured. A formal trade treaty was finally concluded in 1829, with formal diplomatic relations established a decade later. From this inauspicious start, things did not get better. Most of the time, relations simply languished, with a few moments of heated tension. This was mostly a relationship of benign neglect, with ambassadors only being exchanged after the turn of the twentieth century.

The second chapter discusses the mass migration 3.7 million people from Austria-Hungary to the US between 1880 and the beginning of the Great War. Since roughly one-third of those immigrants eventually returned home, Austria-Hungary developed a large consular network in the US to serve them. Most of this immigration was motivated by economic factors, and most of the immigrants were ethnic Poles, Slovaks, Magyars, or Croatians/Slovenians.

The years of US "neutrality" during the First World War are covered in chapter 3. This period was marked by a rise in tension between the two countries. Austria-Hungary demanded the US stop exporting war materiel, and the US refused. Unable to repatriate his countrymen for military service, Austro-Hungarian Ambassador Constantin Dumba exhorted them not to work in the US munitions industry. He also engaged in some questionable activities that bordered on espionage and eventually led to his expulsion in 1915. His

absence did not hinder sabotage and espionage activities undertaken by other subjects of the Dual Monarchy.

In the fourth chapter, Bednar gives his “countdown to disaster” (140)—ten events that led to the destruction of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Beginning with Austria’s termination of diplomatic relations with the US in response to the US declaration of war on Germany (but not Austria), to what he terms a “finale in five acts” (195), Bednar dissects the interplay between the two countries at key moments. The US does not fare well in this examination. A harsh and unflattering light, although not altogether undeserved, is thrown on US actions.

The last chapter covers the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, lamenting the short shrift Austria received at St. Germain. Here, again, American actions and inactions are examined. Wilson is front and center, ignoring other members of the American Commission to Negotiate Peace (ACNP) as well as the so-called Black Book, a collection of materials, papers, and proposals to be used by the commission. Bednar returns to the conventional view of failure for both the conference and American participation in it.

Transatlantic Relations and the Great War is a novel and fresh examination of an often-neglected topic. Kurt Bednar poses questions rarely considered with regards to the American–Austro-Hungarian relationship. Was the dissolution of Austria-Hungary truly a *fait accompli* with the end of World War I, or could the empire have lived on? Could or should the US have done more to preserve it? Were there other alternatives? This work examines just one of the many strands that compose these knotty questions, but it provides much food for thought for the next generation of historians.

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Peripheries at the Centre: Borderland Schooling in Interwar Europe

By Machteld Venken. New York: Berghahn Books, 2021. Pp. xi + 265. Cloth \$135.00. ISBN: 978-1789209679.

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Questions related to the rights of national minorities were among the thornier challenges confronting Europe as it emerged from the carnage of the First World War. The principle of national self-determination which guided the treaties ending the conflict offered legitimacy to newly created “nation-states” and justified the acquisition of new territory for others. At the same time, it helped bolster national grievances for those who felt cheated by newly established borders, and motivated nationalization policies aimed at making the ideal of the nation-state a reality. As scholarship from the past few decades has demonstrated, these tensions created an environment where, for many, the First World War was only the prelude to continued conflict. In this excellent study, Machteld Venken demonstrates that schools were often the front line of these struggles.

Venken offers a thorough, deeply researched comparison of schooling in Polish Upper Silesia and the regions of Eupen, Sankt Vith, and Malmedy in Belgium to illustrate the complexity of education policy in European borderlands in the interwar period. Without question, the quality of this comparison is the book’s greatest strength. Analyses of interwar borderlands tend to prioritize Central and Eastern Europe, while territorial changes in the