



Steffen Bruendel. *Volksgemeinschaft oder Volksstaat: Die „Ideen von 1914“ und die Neuordnung Deutschlands im Ersten Weltkrieg.* Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2003. 403 S. EUR 49.80, gebunden, ISBN 978-3-05-003745-5.



Reviewed by Eric Kurlander

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This ponderous monograph on Karl I (IV)'s brief tenure as Emperor of Austria-Hungary is longer than it is has to be. That is the least of its problems. For all the richness of its archival sources, many of which are painstakingly collected in a companion volume, the research effort is uneven and the use of evidence inconsistent. The argument, simplistic as it is, is also rather convoluted. Most troubling is the author's suggestion that the *real* malefactors of the First World War were not the Austrian Emperor, nor even the German Kaiser, but an assortment of "traitorous" Freemasons, Jewish Bolsheviks, Pan-Germans, and Czech nationalists (strange bedfellows, to be sure) who would stop at nothing to bring down Karl's pious and well-intentioned regime. This argument is not only indicative of questionable scholarship; it propagates some of the twentieth century's most pernicious conspiracy theories. Throw in a bewildering array of contemporary photos, many of them wholly tangential to the project at hand (for example, Woodrow Wilson visiting George Washington's grave, p. 316), and

you have, to put it mildly, a flawed work of history.

Given the plethora of existing literature on Karl I, the author's opening premise that *Untergang* provides the first scholarly [*wissenschaftlich fundierte*] account of Emperor Karl's domestic and foreign policy appears rather specious (p. 11). [1] Instead of providing an original interpretation of a well-trammeled topic, Kovacs intersperses a desultory narrative of traditional military and diplomatic history with extraneous comments on the personal habits and travel itinerary of the Emperor and Empress Zita, their dinner companions, or the latest meeting of the Grand Loge of Paris. Indeed, the repeated mention of the Freemasons in increasingly portentous tones (pp. 114, 117, 157, 331) would almost be amusing if not for the hardly concealed hostility to Jews (pp. 104-105, 195, 307, 566, 644) and Slavs (pp. 265, 506-508) as well. All three of these conspiratorial leitmotifs distract us from the author's otherwise useful analysis of the centrifugal effects of the mounting nationality conflict on the Austro-Hungarian war effort.

There are good reasons to study Karl's star-crossed reign in renewed detail. He was the supreme civil and military commander of a vast multinational empire, without whose millions of sacrifices the superior German war machine could not have survived as long as it did. Unlike his senescent predecessor Franz Joseph II, Karl understood Austria-Hungary's delicate domestic and military situation and made repeated efforts to shorten the war, prevent the entry of the United States, moderate Germany's annexationist demands and ultimately eventuate a separate peace with the Entente.[2] Nevertheless, the book's argument that Karl was a highly perspicacious and principled martyr facing circumstances beyond his control is hardly tenable. Karl's brief reign was desultory and self-destructive at worst, pragmatic and uninspired at best. The diplomatic foray for which the Austrian Kaiser is most famous--his late attempt to negotiate a separate peace with the Entente--was an utter failure. In spring 1917, Karl ordered his Foreign Minister Count von Czernin to deliver a secret letter suing for peace to the French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau through the Empress Zita's brother, Prince Sixtus of Bourbon-Parma (then fighting as an officer in the Belgian army; that is, *against* Austria). Not only did the letter (the wrong draft, as it turns out) indicate Karl's willingness to surrender the German province of Alsace-Lorraine to the French, but a provocative speech by Czernin a year later caused Clemenceau to break off the negotiations and publish the letters in full. The revelation of Karl's numerous territorial concessions sent shockwaves through the European press, Austria-Hungary and Germany in particular. With one magnificent diplomatic gaffe, the Kaiser and his foreign minister had managed to offend France, undermine the legitimacy of their own government, and permanently alienate Austria's strongest ally. The Emperor Karl and--not surprisingly--Kovacs blame Count Czernin for the crisis. For all his good intentions, however, the Kaiser's own military and diplomatic vacillations contrib-

uted to the mission's failure as much as Czernin's incompetence.

It does not help matters that Kovacs's research efforts are surprisingly narrow for a work that takes as its primary purpose the establishment of the Kaiser's central role in the diplomatic and military history of the First World War. Too many sources come from the personal papers of the Kaiser's own military commanders and eccentric contemporary Austrian pamphleteers. Not enough derive from the diplomatic corps of the Entente, not to mention the copious array of primary and secondary literature available in German, French, and English. In turn, Kovacs's Karl I strikes a much more capable and sympathetic figure than a wider reading of the sources probably warrants. Illustrating the subjective and anachronistic fashion in which sources are generally employed, the chief source citing Karl's contemporary importance is a private letter written by the Kaiser's wife only weeks after his funeral (p. 5). Indeed, Kovacs's account provides excellent fodder for the Vatican's beatification of the last Austrian Emperor in October 2004. That Karl's uncle initiated the First World War, that Karl himself commanded troops who employed poison gas, and that he then made two futile and bloody attempts to regain his throne long after the armistice play as small a role in Kovacs's analysis as they did in the Vatican's deliberations on Karl's sainthood.[3]

Had the author focused her prodigious energies on composing a truly balanced appraisal of Austrian diplomatic and military efforts, had she employed a more diverse array of German, French, and British sources, and had she dispensed with much of the needless biographical and period detail, this book would represent a valuable contribution to our understanding not only of the last Austrian Kaiser, but of the potential alternatives to the outcome of the First World War. Though meant to be exhaustive, regrettably, this book is merely exhausting. Perhaps a future

historian with equal passion will produce a more satisfying work less deeply informed by the prejudices of the past.

Notes

[1]. While one can debate the scholarly merit of some recent work on the last Austrian Kaiser, considerably more is available than Kovacs suggests (or cites). See Jan Galandauer, *Karel I: Posledni cesky kral* (Prague: Paseka, 2004); Jiri Pernes, *Posledni Habsbukove: Karl, Zita, Otto a snahy o zachranu cisarskeho truno* (Brno: Barrister & Principal, 1999); Peter Broucek, *Karl I (IV): Der politische Weg des letzten Herrschers der Donaumonarchie* (Vienna: Böhlau, 1997); Patrick Germain, *Charles et Zita: derniers souverains d'Autriche-Hongrie* (Nice: France europe éditions, 2002); Michel Dugast, *Charles de Habsburg: le dernier empereur, 1887-1922* (Paris: Duculot, 1991); James Bogle, *A Heat for Europe: The Lives of Emperor Charles and Empress Zita of Hungary* (Leominster: Fowler Wright, 1990); Heinz Rieder, *Kaiser Karl: Der letzte Monarch Österreich-Ungarns 1887-1992* (Munich: Callwey, 1981); Bertita Harding, *Imperial Twilight: The Story of Karl and Zita of Hungary* (New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1939); Gordon Brook-Shepherd, *The Last Habsburg* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1968); Leo Valiani, *The End of Austria-Hungary* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1973; Italian edition, 1966); Robert Pick, *The Last Days of Imperial Vienna* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975); Richard Georg Plaschka and Karlheinz Mack, *Die Auflösung des Habsburgerreiches; Zusammenbruch und Neuorientierung im Donauraum* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1970); Imre Balassa, *Death of an Empire* (New York: Hillman-Curl, 1937); Arthur Polzer-Hoditz, *The Emperor Karl* (London: Putnam, 1930); Peter Feldl, *Die letzten Tage Österreich-Ungarns* (Vienna: Zsolnay, 1968); Reinhold Lorenz, *Kaiser Karl und der Untergang der Donaumonarchie* (Graz: Verlag Styria, 1959); Bruno Brehm, *Weder Kaiser noch König: Der König der Untergang der habsburgischen Monarchie* (Munich: R. Piper & Co., 1933).

[2]. Kovacs is not the first historian to emphasize the peace-loving, beatific character of the last Austrian Emperor. Cf. Eva Demmerle, *Kaiser Karl I: "Selig, die Frieden stiften"* (Vienna: Amalthea, 2004); Heinz von Lichem, *Karl I: Ein Kaiser sucht den Frieden* (Innsbruck: Tyrolea, 1996); Robert Kann, *Die Sixtusaffäre und die geheimen Friedensverhandlungen Österreich-Ungarns im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Munich: Verlag für Geschichte und Politik, 1966).

[3]. See "Austria's Holy Uproar: Vatican Beatification of World War I emperor triggers spirited debate," *MSNBC*, September 28, 2004 <<http://msnbc.msn.com/id/6126292/>>); "Pope to Beatify 'Buffoon' Who Was Austria's Last Emperor," *Guardian Unlimited*, January 19, 2004 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/pope/story/0,12272,1125947,00.html>>.

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