
Reviewed by Jonathan Kwan

Published on H-Nationalism (January, 2018)

Commissioned by Cristian Cercel (Ruhr University Bochum)

As the tidal wave of centenary publications gradually slows, there will be an opportunity to survey the horizons of the vast and ever-increasing historiography on the First World War. Jan Vermeiren’s careful, well-researched study will no doubt occupy a distinguished place in the field. His work reflects two general trends, first, the incorporation of intellectual and cultural history into war studies, and second, the increased recognition of Austria-Hungary as a vital and independent player before and during the war.[1] Vermeiren’s work is not another operational, military history of the Central Powers and their alliance; rather, it investigates the multifarious presence of Austria-Hungary, especially the German-speaking component, in Imperial Germany’s national discourse, both in official discussions and in the wider public sphere. In general, he argues that the war was an opportunity to renegotiate the basis of the German nation, enabling Catholic and left-liberal voices to pose alternative interpretations to the dominant conservative Prussian-Protestant viewpoint. Nevertheless, the fundamentals of the Bismarckian German nation-state remained unassailable—at least for the duration of the war. Aspects might be reframed and reimagined in light of the myriad of possibilities opened by changing events but, according to Vermeiren, the 1871 German nation-state underlay all thinking, at least until 1918. In conclusion, Vermeiren writes that for the course of the war “there certainly was a greater awareness of Germandom abroad, but altogether German statism remained prevalent” (p. 334). According to Vermeiren, it was the loss of the war—the experiences of sudden defeat, revolution, loss of territories, and a punitive peace treaty—that constituted “a major watershed in the history of the German national idea, leading to the breakthrough of the ethnic or völkisch concept of the German nation” (p. 335). Though Vermeiren does not directly address the contentious question of continuities in German history, he clearly postulates a caesura in 1918 followed by a move towards “Greater German” and wider “Volk” conceptions in the interwar and Nazi eras.

His first chapter looks back to the formation of Imperial Germany and sets the foundations for the rest of the book. Interacting, sometimes contradictory, strands in German attitudes towards Austria-Hungary quickly formed in the wake of unification. First, the German nation-state of 1871 was almost immediately accepted as a legitimate political reality. Second, through history, institutions, and culture, there continued to be “a sense of togetherness with the ethnic Germans of the Danube Empire” (p. 20). Third, there was a perception that the Habsburg Monarchy was an
anachronism in the age of nation-states, a moribund political entity. Fourth, from the perspective of German national interests, Austria-Hungary was an important “Great Power,” an ally (from 1879) and a fundamental component for stability in international affairs. To a large extent, the book balances between these different viewpoints in relation to various issues in the Dual Alliance—Austria-Hungary within German history, Mitteleuropa, Hungary, Poland, and the nationality question in the Habsburg Monarchy. When discussing these issues, Vermeiren often systematically covers the wide range of opinions adopted by the various political factions in Germany. Ultimately, German officialdom and the public, by and large, took a stance of “pragmatic realism” towards Austria-Hungary, with no overt intervention in domestic affairs (p. 34). For example, the German-speakers under pressure from Hungarian policies were regarded as a minor, insignificant matter.\[2\]

The outbreak of war witnessed a certain romanticism about the alliance, embodied in the term Nibelungentreu, though Vermeiren believes this has been overemphasized. Relations since the defining events of 1866 and 1870-71 had involved a certain asymmetry between Germany and Austria-Hungary since the latter was much more reliant on the former than vice-versa. This dynamic was further emphasized under the conditions of war. While there was evidence of an “Austrian miracle,” whereby the many nationalities of the Habsburg Monarchy came together to fight for the dynasty and the common state, as the war progressed the German military took on increased burdens and many Germans despaired at their ally. By 1916 there was considerable disharmony in the alliance and many in Austria-Hungary were advocating a more independent course.

An example of this disharmony and Austria-Hungary’s independent position was the discussion of overall war aims, including various plans for a form of Mitteleuropa as well as the difficult issue of Poland. Mitteleuropa meant different things to different people. For some Catholic intellectuals the traditions of the old Holy Roman Empire provided a counternarrative to the prevailing Prussian, Protestant interpretation of German history. From another perspective, some liberals—such as Friedrich Naumann—advocated an economic union under overall German leadership as a desirable outcome of the war. Austro-German nationalists and liberals such as Heinrich Friedjung and Josef Maria Baernreither welcomed such plans since they were predicated on German dominance in the Habsburg Monarchy and could lead to expansion into the Balkans. Ultimately, however, both the Catholic perspective and the dreams of an economic, German-dominated Mitteleuropa, were limited and constrained by the overriding interests and assumptions of the present German nation-state. For example, despite the emergence of Catholic voices, the cults of Luther and Bismarck continued and even strengthened. Vermeiren writes that in official discussions about a form of Mitteleuropa there was a “primacy of state interests over ethno-national solidarity with Germandom abroad” (p. 182). The issue of Poland illustrates the difficulties between the allies, the many changing possibilities, and the persistence of German state thinking.

Different plans for the former Congress Poland (the Russian partition) included incorporation in the Habsburg Monarchy or a protectorate (possibly a buffer state) under German control or, even, a return to Russia. Once again, larger geopolitical concerns and Germany’s state interests trumped any arguments based on ethnic or völkisch reasoning.

Amidst the impressive scholarship and detailed exposition, there are a few minor cavils. The book is structured thematically (and only roughly chronologically), which sometimes makes it difficult to link the changing viewpoints with the changing fortunes in war. While Vermeiren’s overall arguments are well made, each section could have had longer and stronger conclusions, tying in the different elements of the book. For ex-
ample, the balance between a certain conception of the wider German Volk and the specific interests of the Bismarckian state and its institutions could have been conceptualized and traced in a clearer manner. Perhaps Vermeiren could also have postulated on the link, if any, between underlying attitudes and official decision-making.

Overall, Vermeiren’s work is an important corrective to works of intellectual and cultural history which foreground pan-German perspectives. It is rather paradoxical that in a work heavily based on discourse and perceptions, it is the strand of pragmatic, power-political, nation-state interest which repeatedly emerged as decisive, at least until 1918.

Notes


[3]. Winson Chu also emphasizes the importance of German state-centered thinking, even in the interwar period. Winson Chu, The German Minority in Interwar Poland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-nationalism


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=51152

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.