



Jan Vermeiren. *The First World War and German National Identity: The Dual Alliance at War.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 458 pp. \$120.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-03167-8.

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One of the more gratifying outcomes of the recent—to borrow Heather Jones’s evocative phrase—“regeneration” of First World War historiography has been the confirmation that much remains to be done in understanding the conflict in all of its complexity.[1] While much of this scholarship has pivoted on trying to expand the historiographic “field of vision” related to the First World War, whether geographically or temporally, Jan Vermeiren’s impressively researched analysis of the Dual Alliance illuminates the extent to which even deceptively well-worn topics like the alliance system can still provide a new perspective on the political and cultural consequences of the war. As noted by Vermeiren, the historiographic literature on the German-Austro-Hungarian alliance has hitherto been dominated by studies of the diplomatic, economic, and military dimensions of the partnership; by framing his work as a cultural history of the alliance, specifically focusing on how German intellectuals and policymakers regarded their “fellow Germans” in the Habsburg Monarchy, Vermeiren is able to interrogate the extent to which this relationship created the necessary conditions for German interest groups to “present an alternative idea of the German nation” (p. 8). Incorporating recent scholarship on nationalism into his analysis, Vermeiren is less interested in the mechanics of the alliance in prosecuting the

war than in its significance for Germans attempting to define their nation’s position within a rapidly changing world.

As his analysis persuasively substantiates, the result of these debates was not the proliferation of *völkisch* visions of a revived Central European “Germandom” but rather the resilience of more pragmatic considerations regarding the complexities of global politics and trade. In so doing, Vermeiren corrects the longstanding assumption that the war enabled a “breakthrough” of *völkisch* thinking in Germany and argues that it was rather Germany’s “unexpected defeat, the collapse of the established political, social, and economic order, the experience of the revolution, and the loss of former Reich German territories” that precipitated a radical transformation of the German national idea (p. 335). The war experience may have normalized a frame of reference in which Austria was imagined as part of a more expansive German-speaking space in Central Europe, but it was how the war ended that enabled right-wing ideologues to seize on the idea of *Anschluss* as a political talking point.

Vermeiren begins the book by locating Austria within German national discourse in the decades following German unification in 1871; as he shows, German intellectuals and policymakers were simply too preoccupied by the weighty mat-

ters of *Weltpolitik* to devote more than a cursory interest in their neighboring empire. Although plans had materialized for closer German-Austro-Hungarian cooperation in the years leading up to the July Crisis of 1914, these too were ultimately dictated and delineated by the political and economic priorities of the German state. Even as the brief euphoria of 1914 inspired new interest in Austria-Hungary, and Catholic and South German intellectuals sought to mobilize the alliance in order to redefine the German national narrative as a more expansive political and cultural mission, these new currents were never able to displace an older, narrower, and far more pragmatic reading of German priorities oriented around the economic and geopolitical interests of the state.

Thus, the frequently invoked project of a consolidated Central European empire (*Mitteleuropa*) emerges through Vermeiren's analysis not as a "challenge or counter-model" to the nation-state but rather as an attempt to "retain (or regain) Germany's status" as a credible world power (p. 162). The wartime alliance may have made German observers more aware of the complicated internal politics of the Austrian empire, but it did not fundamentally alter their priorities when it came to the question of German state interests, as seen in the calculated dismissal of Hungarian German grievances in the interest of not jeopardizing the relationship with Budapest, or in the escalating resentments between Berlin and Vienna over the so-called Polish Question. Per Vermeiren, in the end, German support of the Habsburg Empire was predicated less on some fictive notion of *völkisch* solidarity and more on *Realpolitik* calculations that Austro-German predominance in Central Europe would better serve German political and economic interests in the region. It was only after

the political status quo was no longer sustainable, as Austro-Hungary began to literally come apart "at the seams," that German nationalists began casting around for a new political settlement for the region.

In parsing a series of often quite complicated debates among German intellectuals, both in the German press and in numerous archival collections, Vermeiren demonstrates a mastery of his extensive source material that makes his analysis and argument both compelling and persuasive. This is all the more impressive because the story he so carefully traces is one of continuity and consistency, and not the narrative of rupture and radicalization we tend to associate with the First World War. Moreover, in revealing the extent to which German nationalist discourse in this era was informed and shaped by international entanglements and global geopolitics, Vermeiren's work resonates as well with recent scholarly reevaluations of Wilhelmine *Weltpolitik*.^[2] Vermeiren's insights thus warrant consideration not just from specialists on the First World War but also from historians working on topics related to modern German history, imperialism, nationalism, globalization, and political radicalization.

Notes

[1]. Heather Jones, "As the Centenary Approaches: The Regeneration of First World War Historiography," *Historical Journal* 56, no. 3 (September 2013): 857-78.

[2]. Erik Grimmer-Solem, *Learning Empire: Globalization and the German Quest for World Status, 1875-1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

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