

Making Minorities and Majorities: National Indifference and National Self-determination in Habsburg Central Europe

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In December of 1918, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, first president of the Czechoslovak Republic and former deputy to the Austrian imperial parliament, published an essay titled “The Problem of Small Nations and States.” The essay sought to explain the world-historical import of the very recent collapse of Austria Hungary¹ and its territorial division among several self-styled nation-states. In so doing, the essay also cited recent history both to justify and to legitimize an emerging new territorial order from which the new Czechoslovak state had greatly benefited. Masaryk’s historical argument placed Czechoslovakia at the forefront of an inexorable historical process. “On the whole,” he wrote (perhaps somewhat over-optimistically), “multinational empires are an institution of the past, of a time when material force was held high and the principle of nationality had not yet been recognized.” He then proceeded to make a key argument that explained both why the principle of nationality had not been recognized in the past, and why the present age represented a critical break with the past. “Because,” Masaryk explained, “democracy had not been recognized.”²

In writing about the continuities and breaks encapsulated in Habsburg Central Europe’s post-imperial transitions, I regularly quote Masaryk’s essay. His words beautifully capture the enduring presumptions that have framed and often continue to influence the way many historians, journalists, and politicians depict the events of 1918–20.³ In particular, these words express most historians’ conception of the relationship of “empire” to “nation.” In this view, empires preceded so-called nation-states chronologically. But empires had also allegedly repressed developing nations, while nations had only gained the opportunity to replace empire once democracy had become a global force for change. These presumptions have also given meaning to our twentieth-century understandings of concepts like “minority” or “majority,” as they apply to the self-styled nation-states that replaced the empires of the Habsburgs, Ottomans, Hohenzollerns, and Romanovs. In Habsburg Central Europe, so the story goes, nations were exceptionally interspersed among each other. It was therefore impossible to draw clear territorial borders between nations without leaving some members of one nation in a neighboring nation-state.

This chapter questions the fundamental presumptions about empire and nation (and thus implicitly about majority and minority) that underlie the logic of the Masaryk quotation, especially the self-evident link between democracy and nation-statehood. I start by explaining the ways in which imperial structures and nationalist movements shaped each other in the nineteenth century, also showing that the two were hardly at odds with each other. Placing the twin phenomena of what I and others have referred to as “national indifference” next to Rogers Brubaker’s “situational nationalism” at the center of the analysis, I pose an alternative understanding of the relationships between empire and nation that I believe lasted well into the post-1918 era in Central and Eastern Europe. Finally, I point out that the efforts of the successor states themselves to ascribe nationality using the full powers of the law and administration made them more “prisons of the peoples” than the empire of the Habsburgs had been.

In the empire of the Habsburgs, unlike in the Ottoman Empire for example, linguistic practice rather than religious practice originally defined nationhood as the Austrian Constitutional Laws (1867) and the Hungarian Law of Nationalities (1868) established it.⁴ Here we also need to emphasize that no linguistically defined group (or what would come to be called nationality) in fact comprised a majority of the population, either in the Empire as a whole or in the two states that together constituted the Dual Monarchy after 1867. In the Austrian half of Austria-Hungary, all such language groups might constitute a majority or a minority of the population in the different regions where they were located. Nevertheless, and despite the claims of later nationalist propaganda, this imperial Austrian state had no official state nationality or language. The German language did serve as a common language for internal communication within the imperial bureaucracy and German was the official language of command for the common Austro-Hungarian military. Still, while German nationalists might use the term *Staatsvolk* to describe their nationality, this particular and nationalist relationship to the state was never more than a claim, and certainly not something recognized by the state. On the other hand, Hungarian did become the official language of administration and education in the Hungarian state after 1867, although informal local administrative practice in some regions often featured other languages simply for lack of local Hungarian speakers.⁵

After the breakup of the Dual Monarchy, and following the Hungarian example, the successor states called themselves nation-states and each claimed to embody a linguistically—or culturally—defined nation. Those inhabitants of the new state who did not belong to the defining nation—and these often represented a substantial portion of the population—were often legally categorized as belonging to specific “minorities.”⁶ At the same time, however, each post-1918 ruling nationality (or “majority”) had developed a mythology under the Habsburg Monarchy that claimed many of its members had in fact been “de-nationalized” by a hostile neighboring nation or by the imperial government. After 1918 some states even attempted to “re-nationalize” those whose families were perceived to have “gone astray” and to have joined the “wrong national community” under the Empire.⁷

But let us return for a moment to Masaryk’s bold claim for the post-imperial successor states in Central, Southern, and Eastern Europe, and about how they differed from the Habsburg Monarchy. Masaryk asserted that multinational empires

had depended on force to hold subject nationalities in thrall, implying that it would have been impossible to hold these nations together in an imperial structure in any other way than by means of coercion. The contemporary recognition of democracy as the necessary principle for state organization in the twentieth century, however, had allegedly ended this forced imposition of imperial rule from above. It was democracy that facilitated the creation of linguistically based nation-states from below. When the people had the opportunity to speak for themselves, according to this view, they had chosen nation-statehood. On one level Masaryk meant this as an argument to legitimate the creation of new states like Poland, Yugoslavia, and his own Czechoslovakia. It also legitimated the territorial aggrandizement of the Italian and Romanian empires that proclaimed themselves nation-states as well. And such arguments were necessary in 1918. After all, the victorious allies—especially the United States—had not easily been convinced about the wisdom of partitioning Austria-Hungary until the very last months of the War.⁸ Their basis in democracy, or in a form of self-determination, protected these states from accusations of imperial and territorial aggrandizement against their neighbors.

A territorial disposition that to us today appears as natural and normal, however, was nevertheless problematic and potentially highly unstable in 1919. Why, for example, should the peace conferences have risked de-stabilizing the region further by condoning the partition of Austria-Hungary and legitimizing untested new states, especially when the Bolshevik revolution threatened so many parts of Europe? Could one really trust the optimistic assertions of some nationalist politicians who—when circumstances required it—could also claim to be fully inexperienced in the arts of politics precisely because of their people's alleged vassalage inside Austria-Hungary?⁹ And how could the allies, themselves openly imperialist, justify the dismemberment of a fellow imperial regime without questioning their own legitimacy, a legitimacy that was indeed debated throughout the world in 1919?¹⁰

These immediate concerns may well explain Masaryk's particular assertions about the qualitative differences between empires and nation-states. They do not, however, oblige us to accept these assertions at face value, as I fear too many historians have done in the century since 1920. The rest of this chapter examines critically the aspects of empire, nationhood, and democracy raised in Masaryk's statement to better understand how the legacies of the Habsburg Empire shaped the ways in which issues of minority and majority populations were conceived in the interwar period and remain influential even today. In particular, these legacies help us to understand why, for example, matters of minorities and so-called "ethnic mosaics" have traditionally been cast as topics particular to Central and Eastern Europe and not to Europe in general. Finally, the chapter also seeks to remind us that many Europeans around 1900 may have felt little or no significant and enduring tie to a national community.

My examples are drawn from the institutional, administrative, and political practices of the Habsburg Monarchy, and from popular attitudes within Habsburg society. First, I trace the ways in which systems of national identification developed as byproducts of imperial structures and practices around language use (one could even say as products of unintended imperial encouragement). Second, I investigate the question of the subject (or agent) of that democracy that was allegedly finally recognized in 1918.

Who in fact was given the choice to determine her or his political fate after the War? Third, using the concept of national indifference, I assess the nationalist character and significance of the revolutions that ended Habsburg rule in Central Europe, and their implications for subsequent systems of managing so-called national majorities and minorities.

Empire and Nationhood

Masaryk's quotation placed multinational empires and nation-states at opposite ends of an imagined spectrum of forms of political organization. Force is the dominant consolidating principle at one end of this spectrum and democracy is the dominant principle at the other end. Only force, Masaryk asserts, could have held so many different nations within empires. Yet the most rudimentary examination of the history of the Habsburg Monarchy in the nineteenth century reveals a far different and more complex picture of the relationship between concepts of empire and nation. As political concepts whose fundamental meanings changed radically during the nineteenth century, nation and empire in fact developed in close relationship to each other and were often mutually constitutive of each other. Each gave the other meaning, and the programs pursued by each did not necessarily exclude those of the other. Far from being understood as polar opposites, empire and nation could be seen as close allies. To put it simply, most nationalists in the Habsburg Monarchy had good reason to be imperial patriots, and most imperial propagandists used concepts of nationhood to strengthen their justifications of empire.

Twentieth-century nationalists often claimed in retrospect that after centuries during which the Empire had successfully suppressed the national principle, in the early nineteenth century so-called nationalist "awakeners" had made "sleeping" peoples conscious again that they belonged to national communities. These national communities were usually understood to be rooted in distinctive language use going back centuries, sometimes over a thousand years to the time of the ancient Romans or earlier. This version of history increasingly asserted that despite their spatial proximity to each other, people who used different languages in the nineteenth century descended from different national communities distinguished not only by language use but also by recognizably different cultures. The so-called "awakeners," following Herder's imagery for the "sleeping Slavs," were claimed to have been early activists, nationalists who sought to revive the use of national languages that had fallen into disuse under the Empire. In cases where a language had little written history, their object was to codify the language, to give it a modern grammar and vocabulary. Some of these "awakeners" were folklorists who sought to rescue local folk cultures from oblivion, in a century where standardized written communication rapidly replaced more traditional oral forms. Some were interested in preserving oral languages through codification, defining certain languages as dialects of larger languages. Many argued over which dialect constituted the purest form of a spoken language that could then serve as the basis for a written language. In the early nineteenth century, for example, there was

no agreed-upon “Slovene language,” nor in fact was there a recognized written Serb or Slovak language. Instead, activists and linguists debated the significance of regional differences and similarities, giving some spoken languages distinctive grammars. The individuals who later were called “awakeners” often had not shared particularly nationalist goals. But later activists recast their work in specifically nationalist terms.¹¹

The work of the early “awakeners” allegedly produced popular movements that soon demanded cultural and political rights for their nations and eventually brought down empires to achieve those rights. In fact, however, it was largely the Habsburg state itself that unintentionally created the conditions that promoted this linguistic concept of cultural and political nationhood in the nineteenth century. The Habsburgs’ holdings had constituted—like many other states in Europe—a composite state that included territories governed under quite different legal traditions and customs and that employed different vernacular and bureaucratic languages. The Habsburgs did not begin to develop a common and integrated imperial state structure until the eighteenth century, and this process was neither simple nor easy to impose on their varied regional holdings. In fact, up until 1804, when Emperor Franz II of the Holy Roman Empire proclaimed himself Emperor Franz I of Austria, there had been no Austrian empire. In 1815, imperial Austria was one of Europe’s youngest states.

The Habsburg Empire and National Difference

Although the Habsburgs held the title of Holy Roman Emperor (of the German Nation) since the late fifteenth century, they did not associate themselves with a single national language in their own realms. They saw themselves—at least in theory—as rulers of a universal empire, in the same way that they proclaimed themselves protectors of a universal Catholic Church. What did this mean in practice? The developing Habsburg state ruled over territories that historically used a range of different languages for official and local functions. The Habsburgs had not opposed the use of local languages for official and semi-official purposes, or for local primary education. Even the failed efforts of Joseph II in the 1780s, or of Francis Joseph in the 1850s, to enforce the German language as a kind of official bureaucratic language, never sought to end fully the use of other languages at the local or regional level.¹² Proclamations were made locally in more than one language, and until 1847, the Hungarian Diet, for example, conveniently used Latin in its deliberations, a policy that meant that no one had the advantage of speaking her or his own language in the Diet’s proceedings. This institutional recognition of linguistic diversity was a result of pragmatism in a traditionally composite state.¹³

During this period, even the term “nation” did not at first carry the same ethno-linguistic connotations that it would by the end of the nineteenth century. In 1800 “nation” more often referred to the privileged members of a regional diet. It was they who constituted the nation, not the ordinary people who might or might not share a similar language. Nation could also refer to a single region that might well encompass inhabitants who spoke a diverse range of languages, such as the “Moravian nation”

or the “Hungarian nation.” But unlike cases in other parts of the world or in earlier periods where the term “nation” had held such different meanings, nationhood in Habsburg Austria in the nineteenth century became defined overwhelmingly by the question of language use, reinforced in some cases by religious practice.

Both in imperial Austria and in the emergent Hungarian state, the 1848–9 revolutions saw a critical transformation in understandings and treatment of language differences. Although nationhood remained a slippery concept, used by many actors to advance very different agendas, the focus on linguistic practice as the basis for national difference became decisive. In imperial Austria, for example, the new parliament faced the question of what language in which to conduct its business. The deputies debated in German, as a common language of the university educated, but they made concessions, for example, when Galician peasant deputies arrived in Vienna who required translations to understand the proceedings. When it came time to draft a constitution for Austria, a parliamentary committee debated how best to organize the imperial administration to enable the citizens to use their own languages in primary education or in communication with the bureaucracy. Paragraph 4 of the Kremsier Parliament’s draft bill of rights gave every nation of the Empire equal rights to use its language and develop its nationality.¹⁴

When again in 1867 liberals wrote constitutions and laws for each half of the new dual Monarchy, they again transformed this pragmatic policy into a question of rights. In Austria, the constitutional issue of language use was debated in a way that sought to guarantee both the distinctive historic rights of the individual provinces that used specific languages, and the imperial citizen’s common right to use one’s own distinctive language in daily life situations. In the context of this discussion, deputies consciously referred to “minorities.” Bohemian German liberal Eduard Herbst (1820–92), soon to be Minister of Justice, asked his colleagues in the parliament: “Since this large empire, thanks to a unique fate, unites in itself such a diversity of nations, don’t we have to find the providential unity of the empire, in the protection it gives to the individuals and minorities that are dispersed everywhere?”¹⁵ Legal historian Joachim Pirker notes, however, that in general the deputies in 1867 preferred to speak of the rights of individuals and of nations rather than of majorities and minorities.¹⁶

In Hungary the rights of different nationalities were embodied in a particular law rather than in a constitution. Drafted by Baron Josef Eötvös (1813–71), the original law proposed a liberal framework to guarantee a range of rights to non-Hungarian speakers, but as individuals not as members of nations. Unlike Austrian constitutional law, the Hungarian law did not concede collective rights to language groups or nations, but rather to individuals. The details of the law’s application were left to future legislation and starting in the 1870s that legislation generally worked to restrict the rights of non-Hungarian speakers to use their languages in public life.¹⁷

Although after 1867 both the Austrian and Hungarian states guaranteed certain kinds of rights to users of officially recognized languages, they did so in very different ways and with different effects. In both contexts, however, speakers of different languages became understood as members of diverse nations when taken as a whole, although no one in either state was legally assigned to a nation, and no one needed legally to belong to one. These policies produced two important developments. First, the two states—for

very different reasons—started to collect statistics about the numbers of speakers of different languages. In the Austrian case this practice was meant to help determine language use in schools, the courts, and in the local and provincial administration. By comparison, in Hungary the census sought to measure the successes and failures of the so-called “Magyarization” policies intended to make all Hungary’s citizens into speakers of the Hungarian language, at least as a second language if not as a “mother tongue.” Secondly, the constitutional articulation of language rights led to a steady buildup of case law and administrative practice around language use both in the Austrian state and in the shared imperial institutions such as the military.¹⁸ These legal decisions articulated principles that often survived in the legal codes of successor states in the interwar period later and that regulated specific policies around what came to be known as “minority rights.”¹⁹ The application of Austrian principles of language use for the common military also produced considerable friction between Hungary’s rulers and the imperial government. The Hungarian political classes opposed the application of the more liberal Austrian language laws to the military. In fact, they sought to create their own military force altogether, something the emperor-king, keenly aware of his military prerogative, refused to countenance.

It was generally court cases in Austria in the 1870s and 1880s that shaped administrative practices around language use, answering such questions as “how many speakers of a second language in a district required the hiring of teachers or bureaucrats who could speak that language?” Such considerations led to legally defined minority languages coming into being at the level of local districts and crownlands (provinces) in Austria. For a language to be recognized officially in a crownland, for example, it had to be reported in the census by at least 20 percent of the residents. For a language group to demand a state-funded minority language school in a district (Austria had an eight-year educational requirement for all boys and girls after 1868), the courts ruled that a minimum of forty school-age children within a two-hour walking distance of the school had to speak that language.²⁰ In a military regiment, if 20 percent of the recruits spoke a particular language, then the officers (up to the level of captain) were obligated to use that language, not in military commands, but in normal communication.²¹

I mention these administrative details for four reasons. First to remind us that at the level of the state in Austria there were no linguistic or national majorities or minorities. The term “minority” was used contextually starting in 1867, but it did not have the same significance it would have after 1918. This was partly because the state as a whole had no official nation, nor did it ascribe an immutable linguistic or national identity to its citizens. Secondly, I raise these details to emphasize that the law enabled nationalist activists to assert increasingly that language use was legally the premier sign of national belonging, whether or not an individual actually felt a sense of belonging to a nation. Nationalist activists of all kinds in Austria regularly—and misleadingly—treated the census as a moment that measured their demographic strengths and weaknesses.²² Thirdly, as mentioned above, after 1918 a state like Czechoslovakia adopted many of these familiar regional administrative practices such as the 20 percent rule to determine whether a language group qualified for what were now called “minority rights” in a particular district. Fourthly, and as mentioned above, in the self-styled nation-states after 1918, membership in a language group was no longer a question of

a person's un-reflected behavior or personal choice, as it had been in Austria-Hungary. Under the successor states it was now up to government agencies, police detectives, and the testimonies of meddling neighbors to determine authentic national belonging, by carrying out intrusive investigations of an individual's or family's history, sociability, and home life.²³

How Empire and Nation Could Fit Together

Another reason to explore the details of the imperial system is that its structures and rules about language use produced a vibrant political system organized largely around linguistic demands expressed in nationalist political terms. It was not merely the courts and bureaucrats that determined how constitutional rights were implemented, but the political parties as well. Masaryk may have argued that the Empire was held together by force but in fact, it was held together largely by the efforts of regional—usually nationalist—political parties that sought to gain as many tangible benefits for themselves and their voters as possible. These benefits ranged from appointments to influential bureaucratic posts to extra funding for new schools. Before the First World War, nationalist political parties had every incentive to maintain this system. Several nationalist parties even gained significant forms of local political autonomy for their linguistic nations. Some, like the Czech, Hungarian, Italian, and Polish nationalists, even built empires of patronage within the larger Empire, and were quite committed to maintaining the system. Even when their most radical deputies performed outrageous acts of nationalist hostility toward each other in public, they often depended on the state to maintain their positions of power.²⁴

Politics in the Habsburg Monarchy—especially the Austrian half—revolved around ongoing efforts by nationalist politicians to win ever-more ambitious forms of linguistic and political rights and autonomy for their alleged national communities. To do so, they argued increasingly that extreme cultural differences separated their nation from other nations to the point where national differences could become racialized. In imperial Austria, all of this took place within the context of a relatively liberal—and at some levels even proto-democratizing—political system that was comparable to many of the systems one encountered in other contemporary European states.²⁵ We have trouble seeing this point in part because the nationalists themselves never openly declared themselves satisfied with one victory or another. By definition, of course, nationalists can never express full satisfaction about anything. Their political influence depends on maintaining a sense of heroic struggle and unfair victimization.

At the same time, during the nineteenth century the Empire and its propagandists developed new definitions and visions for empire that relied on nation as much as nations used the structures of empire to develop their politics. After the unifications of Italy and Germany removed Habsburg influence from these former sites of power and prestige, the Empire could no longer portray itself in the universal European terms of the Holy Roman Empire/German Nation of the past. Instead, propagandists and scientists increasingly portrayed the Empire as a kind of protective shield that encompassed many nations while fostering their cultural and civilizational advancement. This

vision of empire too required a cataloging of the various nations and their cultural accomplishments or deficiencies. The most famous of these imperial efforts was the so-called *Kronprinzenwerk*, *Österreich-Ungarn in Wort und Bild* (*Austria-Hungary in Word and Image*). This series of volumes, each devoted to a crownland or region of the Empire, was inspired by Crown Prince Rudolf in 1883 who also wrote an introduction to the series before his suicide in 1889. The series was published in both German and Hungarian editions, and included essays commissioned by two editorial staffs from 423 experts on the flora, fauna, geology, and ethnographic diversity of each region. The series documented the diversity of the Empire and its peoples, and implicitly argued for the role of the state in the work of bringing higher levels of culture and civilization to the different regions.²⁶

Given the agitation by nationalist politicians, on the one hand, and the efforts of imperial propagandists, on the other, it would be easy to assume that by 1900 most citizens of the dual monarchy had a strong sense of attachment to one national community or another. While historians have assumed for a long time that populations in Habsburg Central Europe had become fully nationalized by 1900, lingering doubts remained among the nationalists themselves about the effectiveness of their mobilizing efforts. Historical research and theorizing in the past two decades have also disputed the all-too-easy presumption about firm popular national loyalties and their significance. After all, it was nationalists themselves who originated the term “national indifference,” both with condescension and anxiety, applying it to those problematic people who apparently did not demonstrate adequate loyalty to the nation in their daily lives. They also applied other terms such as national “amphibians” or “hermaphrodites” to people who appeared to waver between languages and nations, or they labeled them backward and ill-informed.²⁷ For historians in the past fifteen years, the term “national indifference” (or “indifference to nation”) characterizes a broad range of attitudes that shaped an individual’s perception of a given situation along with her or his loyalties. Those of us who developed the concept wanted to move away from the question “who was a nationalist in what nation?” or “who was not-national?” Rather, we have tried to examine situations that produced group identities and to ask in what situations people may have seen the world through the lens of nationhood, to use Rogers Brubaker’s terminology, or in what situations that lens of nation lost its relevance. This approach to the question of behavior or attitude moves us away from ideas of fixed, authentic, or even fluid identities. Instead, it invites us to evaluate *why* the idea of nation might be important in one situation and not in another.²⁸

Nationalists at the time understood “indifference” as behaviors that contradicted a person’s own authentic national interest. If there were two different language schools in a town, to which one did a family send its children? When the decennial Austrian census was taken, which language did family members report as their “language of daily use?” In an election, which national party did a voter support? To which local social clubs did a person belong? When it came to consumption or church attendance, which shops did an individual patronize, which church services did she attend? The answers to these questions, it was presumed, demonstrated where an individual’s national loyalties lay. The problem with this presumption was that in real life, people often made a variety of choices that contradicted or confirmed one or the other or both

national interests. In regions or crownlands where more than one language was spoken, husband and wife might even report different languages of daily use on the census or change their answers over time. Farming families sent their children on exchanges with a family that used a different language, in order to acquaint the child with both provincial languages. Knowledge of both languages sometimes made good economic sense and might help a child's social mobility. In multilingual regions of Bohemia some families attempted to send their children to different schools in different years for the same purpose. This was often the case because increasingly after 1867, schools rarely taught both provincial languages.²⁹

By the end of the nineteenth century, in crownlands where nationalist political conflict was strongest, both sets of nationalists might compete for the national loyalties of a single family. This competition was especially harsh when children registered for the coming school year, or when the decennial census was taken. The dynamic of competition often radicalized nationalists on all sides as they competed for the same people and they also developed cultural or psychological explanations to rationalize why someone might be indifferent and "betray" the national community.³⁰

For many people, however, it seems that nationhood was important in some particular situations, and quite unimportant or irrelevant to many other situations. Moreover, nationhood was only one of several kinds of loyalties, such as religious, local, regional, or imperial patriotic that defined people's outlooks. Most of these identifications tended to define and reinforce each other, rather than to contradict each other. This was the case, for example, for the military veterans analyzed by Laurence Cole whose organizations proudly proclaimed their regional identifications, their use of their national language, and their patriotic loyalty to Emperor/King and fatherland.³¹ These elements were not particular and could not easily be separated out from each other, precisely because they both defined and reinforced each other's meanings. In this way, nationalist and imperial identifications often reinforced each other.

The outbreak of war in 1914 did little at first to undermine this general reality. However, from the very start of the war several influential elite military and bureaucrats (along with certain nationalists) expressed deep mistrust toward both other nationalist political parties or language groups that—without any evidence—they presumed to be disloyal to the Empire. In August and September of 1914, this mistrust often manifested itself in brutal persecutions against Ruthenes/Ukrainian-speaking civilians unfairly suspected of Russian sympathies, or Slovene or Serb speakers suspected of pro-Serbia feelings. Early on government officials even encouraged or "tolerated" local popular initiatives taken against perceived traitors that could take the form of informing on one's neighbors in a kind of mass hysteria.³² All of this became possible thanks to the authority granted a military high command that distrusted all popular politics and used its emergency powers to impose a harsh military dictatorship that abandoned the rule of law for three years.

Stories of the wartime treachery of some national groups were most often used either to impugn a rival nationalist group, or to hide the fundamental incompetence of Austria-Hungary's military leaders and their strategies. It is true that some Austro-Hungarian POWs in Russia or Italy were freed in exchange for their agreement to fight with the Allies against Austria-Hungary, but we should not generalize these behaviors

to entire populations, for which there is no evidence. Finally, we should keep in mind that the only wartime armed nationalist revolt against an imperial power occurred not in Habsburg Austria-Hungary, but rather in Ireland in 1916.³³

National Revolution, Democracy, Nationhood

How then should we evaluate the events celebrated as national revolutions that brought down the Habsburg Monarchy in 1918, keeping in mind the conceptual tool of national indifference? On the one hand, the death of Emperor-King Francis Joseph and the accession of his young grandnephew, Charles I, reversed many elements of the brutal military dictatorship that alienated so many citizens since 1914. Charles amnestied political prisoners, pressured the Hungarian government to expand the suffrage, and reopened the Austrian Parliament (the Hungarian parliament had continued to function during the war). His government also created and generously funded a new ministry of social welfare. But these reversals hardly revived confidence in the Empire. Instead, greater freedom simply unleashed more open political opposition to and criticism of a regime that had demanded unyielding sacrifice from its people but could not provide them with the necessities to survive. For this reason, the revolutionary events that produced the fall of the Habsburg Monarchy were primarily about human survival.

By 1918, since the imperial state was no longer able to ensure its people's physical survival, the administrative links to the various regions began to crumble. State officials could no longer control strikes or popular violence or pogroms, and they could no longer guarantee even minimal food or fuel supplies. Local administrators who found themselves hard pressed to find solutions to impossible problems could expect no help from the imperial state. When they took independent action, it was for regionalist reasons and in regional contexts, rather than for nationalist reasons. The crownland territorial divisions within which local bureaucrats worked to prevent a complete breakdown of order, to provide populations with sustenance for survival, or in which they adjudicated conflicting property claims, also did not coincide with the territorial boundaries later claimed by nationalist politicians for their nation-states. When some regional actors took control in Styria (later claimed by Austria and Yugoslavia) or in Transylvania (later claimed by Hungary and Romania), their seizures of power received a retrospective nationalist interpretation.

For other reasons, the regional conditions also favored later nationalist interpretations of revolutionary events. As local people and institutions sought solutions to food, fuel, medical, and housing crises, they abandoned the imperial center to manage survival on their own. And when, for example, the new Imperial Ministry of Welfare doled out millions of crowns to local experts to distribute to people, those local experts were generally activist members of nationalist organizations in the crownlands. It was their nationalist organizations and not the Empire that reaped the credit for having helped local populations.³⁴ By the time the war was clearly lost in September 1918, there was no longer a functioning central state. For all these reasons, there we cannot date the Empire's fall to a specific or even to a symbolic date. In a manner typical of the layered forms of sovereignty of empire, the Monarchy simply retrospectively granted

increasing degrees of political autonomy to break-away regions and the self-styled “national councils” that constituted themselves as regional authorities.

People also turned increasingly away from the imperial center and to local and regional officials for their survival. Moreover, unless they were in a major city, they may not have even known much about the proclamations of various new states that occurred in October and November of 1918. Several of the new states that arose in the wake of imperial collapse only lasted for a few weeks or months. Most of these rose and fell on military strength or weakness. Some were products of local efforts to manage the food crisis and maintain social stability. How many of us recall the Western Ukrainian Republic or German Bohemia (with its two capitals at Teplitz/Teplice and Reichenberg/Liberec), the Hutsul Republic, German Southern Moravia, or the short-lived Miners’ Republic in Istria? These entities have mostly been forgotten because eventually they fell to the superior power of Polish, Czechoslovak, or Italian nationalist armed forces. But their primary purpose—and the reason they held some legitimacy in the last months of 1918—was their commitment to provide stability, continuity, and above all survival within their borders. For the short time they existed, people treated these “statelets” as the legitimate successors to the failed Empire, as the hundreds of petitions and denunciations from ordinary people to the officials of the state of *Deutschböhmen*, for example, attest.

As we know from subsequent history, and from the Masaryk quotation at the outset, a great deal of effort has been expended retrospectively to give these changes a more pointedly nationalist significance. This was most obvious in the diverse ways that today’s successor states commemorated the centennial of the events of 1918 that had brought them into being or enlarged their territories. None of them incorporate their imperial histories into their national histories. All of them maintain a largely nationalist explanation for the foundation or expansion of their states after 1918. But as recent research has demonstrated, these local revolutionary administrations often involved a forced collaboration of nationalists from different sides, simply to manage survival. To call these revolutions national revolutions would be a stretch.³⁵

Let me return one final time to Masaryk’s view of the issue of imperial force as opposed to national democracy to reconsider these national revolutions specifically in the context of claims about democracy. Masaryk inferred that nation-statehood was the necessary outcome of the implementation of a democratic system. The “national self-determination” of the time implied that it was individuals who had risen up collectively to choose a new state form. Not surprisingly, after years of starvation, misery, and a harshly unjust dictatorship, Austro-Hungarians had indeed lost faith in the legitimacy of their state, just as many Germans, Russians, French, Italians, and Irish had lost faith in theirs. But the presumption that democracy would necessarily produce a nation-state form begs the question of the democratic subject at the very heart of this issue.

If we ask, “who is the subject, the actor, the beneficiary, of this democracy?” we can see the problem more clearly. In 1919 it was the idea of the nation itself, the collectivity (or more accurately its nationalist spokespeople), whose democratic rights were at the center of most discourse and politics. It was not, however, the individual. The link between the idea of national self-determination and democracy—understood in the abstract as a kind of popular sovereignty—made the idea of the collective nation

somehow the embodiment of democracy. Even a cursory glance at the subsequent history of this region shows us that in fact, the individual was far more constrained by the demands of national belonging after 1918 than she or he had been by the demands of belonging to an empire. To put it crudely: whereas the Empire had largely avoided the question of national ascription, the nation-state adopted it with fervor.³⁶

Polities that asserted their state identity in narrowly ethnic, linguistic, or nationalist terms, terms that approached racialism in their strong insistence on difference, had replaced the Empire. This change also required that individuals had to be treated primarily as members of national groups. The enjoyment of citizenship and civil rights depended on group membership now, rather than on an individual's relationship to a state.

Conclusion

National self-determination did not contradict empire. In many ways the concept, defined in terms of language use, was both a product and served as a guiding principle of Habsburg institutions, administrative practices, and legal decisions in the nineteenth century. This was true for the post-1867 Austrian half of the Dual Monarchy, for the Dual Monarchy's joint institutions, and in the 1910 statute for Bosnia Herzegovina. But beyond the apparent simplicity of the term "national self-determination" lurked key questions of scale. What was the unit of self-determination? The individual? The nation? Who determines what for whom? And what happens to those who, in the abstract, were rendered invisible, those who were relegated to minority status, those who did not fit the allowable categories of the nation-state? Some have argued that a range of international and humanitarian organizations—in particular through the League of Nations—replaced empire to guard the interests of these new minorities.³⁷ But it also seems clear that those same international organizations, however unwittingly, also abetted the inevitable tragedies produced by the creation or enlargement of the successor states. After all, their humanitarian purpose was to stabilize the new nation-state order by attempting to alleviate many of the very social problems—refugees, statelessness—that the nation-state solution had caused in the first place.

Many of us have argued that the states that replaced Austria-Hungary were themselves more the products of imperial continuities than their propagandists liked to admit. I have often referred to them as "little empires." Precisely the institutions that regulated questions of nationhood, citizenship status, and cultural difference in these states were adapted from administrative and legal practices in both halves of the Habsburg Monarchy. Only now these institutions and practices existed in constitutional frameworks that validated and privileged belonging to particular nations. In some instances, as Emily Greble has shown with regard to the Muslims of Yugoslavia, this in fact produced a differentiated form of citizenship precisely of the type that nation-states generally claim to reject.³⁸ In other instances, as Dominique Reill has shown with regard to the city of Fiume, the choice to attach to a nation-state constituted an attempt to maintain the privileges of imperial citizenship.³⁹ However, the interwar constitutional frameworks also differentiated these states radically from the old Empire. Legally, as I have argued, in Habsburg Austria, there had been no

linguistic majorities or minorities at the imperial state level. These had only existed in an administrative sense at the level of the crownland (province) or district. Under empire, the fact of belonging to a particular language group had not conferred particular privileges of citizenship or changed one's access to civil rights, the way it did under the successor states. There were certainly technically privileged *languages* in Austria and its crownlands, but not privileged *language groups* or nations. An illiterate peasant from the Gottschee region of largely Slovene-speaking Carniola who spoke German enjoyed no social or legal privileges over a Slovene-speaking merchant in Ljubljana, for example. And in most regions, neither individuals nor families were tied to a specific language group by law, the way they would be under the successor states. None of this argues for the relative benefits of empire nor does it seek to contribute to the unfortunate phenomenon of imperial nostalgia. It is, however, an attempt to argue what should be obvious: first, that ethnic nation-statehood is not the only possible internal organization of states; secondly, that the experience of the twentieth century hardly suggests that ethnic nation-statehood is a form somehow more stable, more democratic in its behavior toward its legal minorities, or, despite Masaryk, less susceptible to exercising force to keep its citizens in line.

Notes

- 1 The official name of the Austrian half of Austria-Hungary was "The Kingdoms and principalities represented in the imperial parliament." It was also referred to as "Cisleithania" while Hungary became "Transleithania." I use "Austria" to denote this state even though this was not its name until 1916. According to the Austrian and Hungarian censuses of 1910, German speakers constituted the largest single linguistic group (at 35.58 percent) of the Austrian population and 23.36 percent of Austria-Hungary as a whole, while Hungarian speakers made up 19.57 percent of the whole and 48.1 percent of Hungary (without the Kingdom of Croatia the number was 54.4 percent). However, these formal numbers tell us little about national identification, since the Austrian census asked people to report their normal "language of use" [*Umgangssprache* in German], not a "mother tongue" or "national language." The Hungarian census asked for mother tongue and it took some account of bilingualism, partly to track the success of the state's Magyarization policies. *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918*. Vol. 3, *Die Völker des Reiches*, ed. Adam Wandruszka and Peter Urbanitsch (Vienna: Verlag der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1980), Tables 1 and 29, 36, 414.
- 2 Thomas Garrigue Masaryk, "The Problem of Small Nations and States," in *We Were and We Shall Be: The Czechoslovak Spirit through the Centuries*, ed. Zdenka and Jan Muzner (New York: Frederick Unger, 1941), 153.
- 3 Andrea Orzoff and Chad Bryant have each analyzed the ways that discursive efforts to promote the legitimizing mythology of a democratic Czechoslovakia "involved the demonization of the Habsburg Monarchy, which was now cast as a reactionary, repressive, and antinational regime." Chad Bryant, *Prague. Belonging in the Modern City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), 126. Also, Andrea Orzoff, *The Battle for the Castle. The Myth of Czechoslovakia in Europe, 1914–1948* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

- 4 Austria's "December Laws" (or constitution) of 1867 defined nationhood largely in linguistic terms for the Austrian half of Austria-Hungary. The Hungarian "Law of Nationalities" of 1868 did the same. In practice, however, religious difference could play a role in national self-definition, especially regarding how Ruthene or Ukrainian nationalists defined themselves in opposition to Polish nationality. Jewish Nationalists sought to establish a Jewish nationality in Austria but the Austrian Supreme Court ruled twice that because language use defined nationality, Jews (who spoke several languages in the Empire) could not be considered a nation. For the different and changing understandings of nationhood in the Ottoman Empire, see Erol Ülker's chapter in this volume.
- 5 Ágoston Berecz, "Top-down and Bottom-up Magyarization in Multiethnic Banat Towns under Dualist Hungary (1867–1914)," *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d'histoire* 28, no. 3 (2021): 422–40.
- 6 After 1918, even the nationalist censuses (with all their manipulations and their amalgamated categories that later broke down, such as Czecho-Slovak or Serbo-Croat) only documented 65.5 percent Czechoslovaks for Czechoslovakia, 69.2 percent Poles in Poland, 71.9 percent Romanians for Romania, 74.3 percent "Serbo-Croat" for Yugoslavia. Statistics from Joseph Rothschild, *East Central Europe between the Two World Wars* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1974), 36, 89, 203, 284.
- 7 This was the case, for example, among Ukrainian or Ruthene speakers and Hungarian-speaking Szeklers in post-1918 Greater Romania. Irina Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 63–7; 136–9. This belief in de-nationalization dominated radical Czech- and German nationalist discourse in pre- and interwar Bohemia, as Tara Zahra demonstrates superbly in *Kidnapped Souls. National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1948* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), and is also a common trope in post-1918 Slovenia. Zahra argues that this belief underlay nationalist frustration with national indifference, and that it radicalized nationalists who often competed for the same children for their national schools.
- 8 On the very late date at which Wilson abandoned Austria-Hungary, see most recently, Larry Wolff, *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2020), 90–6.
- 9 South African President Jan Smuts wondered, for example, whether it would not be wiser to create protectorates comparable to those in the Middle East in Habsburg Central Europe. "The peoples left behind by the decomposition of Russia, Austria, and Turkey are mostly untrained politically; many of them are either incapable or deficient in the power of self-government." Quoted in Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace. The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 45.
- 10 Erez Manela, "Imagining Woodrow Wilson in Asia: Dreams of East-West Harmony and the Revolt against Empire in 1919," *American Historical Review* 111, no. 5 (2006): 1327–51.
- 11 Tomasz Kamusella, *The Politics of Language and Nationalism in Modern Central Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2008), gives an exhausting account of the developing politics of language among several regions of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe. On Herder, see page 495. For other excellent studies on language use and developing nationalism, see Alexander Maxwell, *Choosing Slovakia. Slavic Hungary, the Czechoslovak Language and Accidental Nationalism*

- (London: I.B. Taurus) and Edin Hajdarasic, *Whose Bosnia? Nationalism and Political Imagination in the Balkans 1840–1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015). On Slovene language and nationhood, see the excellent work by *Von Krain Zu Slowenien. Die Anfänge der nationalen Differenzierungsprozesse in Krain und der Untersteiermark von der Aufklärung bis zur Revolution 1768–1848* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2006).
- 12 Gerald Stourzh and others also point out that the language policies of the 1850s did not constitute an attempt to effect a *germanization* of the population, despite claims to the contrary by Hungarian or Czech politicians of the time. Gerald Stourzh, *Die Gleichberechtigung der Nationalitäten in der Verfassung und Verwaltung Österreichs, 1848–1918* (Vienna: Verlag der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1985), 42, 49.
 - 13 On the Hungarian Diet's change from Latin to Hungarian, see István Deák, *The Lawful Revolution. Louis Kossuth and the Hungarians* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979). On the varied significations of multilingualism, see Pieter M. Judson, "Encounters with Language Diversity in Late Habsburg Austria," in *Language Diversity in the Late Habsburg Empire*, ed. Markian Prokopovych, Carl Bethke, and Tamara Scheer (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019), 12–25.
 - 14 *Verfassungsurkunde des österreichischen Kaiserstaates*, <http://verfassungen.at/at-18/verfassung48-i.htm> (accessed June 27, 2021).
 - 15 *Stenographische Protokolle des Hauses der Abgeordneten*, 8.10.1867, 1, p. 784.
 - 16 Jürgen Pirker, "Kollektive Rechte. Strukturfragen und Entwicklung in der Rechtsprechung zu den Freiheiten der Assoziation, Nationalität und Religion im Staatsgrundgesetz von 1869 bis 2019" (Habilitationsschrift, Institut für öffentliches Recht und Politikwissenschaft, Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz, 2019), 104.
 - 17 Joachim von Puttkamer, *Schulalltag und nationale Integration in Ungarn. Slowaken, Rumänen und Siebenbürger Sachsen in der Auseinandersetzung mit der ungarischen Staatsidee 1867–1914* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2003), 36; Ágoston Berecz, *The Politics of Early Language Teaching: Hungarian in the Primary Schools of the Late Dual Monarchy* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2013), 60.
 - 18 On the court cases generally, see Stourzh, *Die Gleichberechtigung*. On the courts and school policy, Hannelore Burger, *Sprachenrecht und Sprachengerechtigkeit im österreichischen Unterrichtswesen 1867–1918* (Vienna: Verlag der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1995).
 - 19 This was the case, for example, with Czechoslovak law regarding the minimum population requirements for the state to provide schools in a minority language. Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls*, especially 106–33.
 - 20 Burger, *Sprachenrecht und Sprachengerechtigkeit*. This forty-child requirement for the establishment of a state school remained a standard used in some of the states to which the minority treaties applied after 1918.
 - 21 Stourzh, *Die Gleichberechtigung*. The situation in the military was interesting in this regard because often even the German-speaking recruits did not know or understand many of the eighty or so German language commands all recruits had to learn. On the military, Tamara Scheer, *Language Diversity and Loyalty in the Habsburg Army, 1868–1918* (Habilitation: University of Vienna, 2020).
 - 22 On the Austrian census and its uses by nationalists, see Pieter M. Judson, *Guardians of the Nation. Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 14–16; Emil Brix, *Die Umgangssprachen in Altösterreich zwischen Agitation und Assimilation: die Sprachenstatistik in der*

- zisleithanischen Volkszählungen, 1880 bis 1910* (Vienna: Verlag der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1982); and Wolfgang Göderle, *Zensus und Ethnizität: zur Herstellung von Wissen und soziale Wirklichkeiten im Habsburgerreich zwischen 1848 und 1910* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2016).
- 23 As Zahra points out, this was common practice even in Czechoslovakia, arguably the most politically democratic of the successor states. Officials who took the census in Czechoslovakia were empowered to dispute a person's answer and to carry out an investigation if they believed the person had given the "wrong answer" about nationality. If the investigation confirmed the suspicions of the official, the individual was subjected to a fine or even to a jail sentence. Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls*, 106; 118–26.
 - 24 Lothar Höbelt, "Bohemia 1913—A Consensual Coup d'état?" *Estates and Representation* 20, no. 1 (2000): 207–14; Gerald Stourzh, "Verfassungsbruch im Königreich Böhmen. Ein unbekanntes Kapitel zur Geschichte des richterlichen Prüfungsrechts im alten Österreich," in *Der Umfang der österreichischen Geschichte. Ausgewählte Studien 1990–2010*, ed. Gerald Stourzh (Vienna: Böhlau, 2011), 139–55.
 - 25 Austria's administrative structures assigned considerable political and economic autonomy to individual communes and this also created considerable space for local initiative and autonomous decision-making. Jeremy King, "The Municipal and the National in the Bohemian Lands, 1848–1914," *Austrian History Yearbook* 42 (2011): 89–109.
 - 26 Pieter M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire. A New History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 327–8. There is now a rich literature on the *Kronprinzenswerk*. For the ways in which Habsburg scientists conceptualized nature in terms of empire, see Deborah Coen, *Climate in Motion. Science, Empire, and the Problem of Scale* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018). On the circulation of imperial knowledge within empire and the organization of universities, see Jan Surman, *Universities in Imperial Austria 1848–1918. A Social History of a Multilingual Space* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2018).
 - 27 Judson, *Guardians*, 1–3.
 - 28 Tara Zahra, "Imagined Non-Communities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis," *Slavic Review* 69, no. 1 (2010): 93–119; Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Pieter M. Judson, "Nationalism and Indifference" in *Habsburg Neu Denken. Vielfalt und Ambivalenz in Zentraleuropa. 30 kulturwissenschaftliche Stichworte*, ed. Johannes Feichtinger and Heidemarie Uhl (Vienna: Böhlau, 2016), 148–55; Martin Van Ginderachter and Jon Fox, eds., *National Indifference and the History of Nationalism in Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2019).
 - 29 This puzzling lack of bilingual schools in multilingual regions resulted from several court cases in which nationalists successfully cited the constitutional provision that no one would have to learn the second provincial language. Using that constitutional argument, nationalists succeeded in closing many traditionally bilingual or "utraqist" schools in Styria, Bohemia, and Moravia.
 - 30 This is the compelling argument in Zahra's *Kidnapped Souls*.
 - 31 Laurence Cole, *Military Culture and Popular Patriotism in Late Imperial Austria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
 - 32 See especially, Martin Moll, *Kein Burgfrieden. Der deutsch-slowenische Nationalitätenkonflikt in der Steiermark 1900–1918* (Innsbruck: Studienverlag, 2007). Other examples are given in Józef Galántai, *Hungary in the First World War*

- (Budapest: Akadémia Kiadó, 1989), 95–8; Irina Marin, “World War I and Internal Repression. The Case of Major General Nikolaus Cena,” *Austrian History Yearbook* 44 (2013): 195–208; Christoph Führ, *Das K u K Oberarmeeekommando und die Innenpolitik in Österreich 1914–1917* (Vienna: Böhlau, 1968), 181.
- 33 On the position of Ireland within the United Kingdom until independence, see Alvin Jackson’s chapter in this volume. For the treatment of Irish loyalists within the Irish Free State and their ambivalent forms of identification during the interwar period, see Brian Hughes’s chapter in this volume.
- 34 Tara Zahra, “‘Each Nation Cares Only for Its Own’: Empire, Nation, and Child Welfare Activism in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1918,” *American Historical Review* 111, no. 5 (2006): 1378–402.
- 35 Gábor Egry, “Negotiating Postimperial Transitions. Local Societies and Nationalizing states in East Central Europe,” in *Embers of Empire. Continuity and Rupture in the Habsburg Successor States after 1918*, ed. Paul Miller and Claire Morelon (New York: Berghahn, 2019).
- 36 It is possible to argue that after 1905 ascription was becoming a legal norm for the first time in the crownland of Moravia, because of specific conditions in the Moravian Compromise of 1905. This compromise between the imperial state and the Czech and German nationalist parties in Moravia divided the population in an arrangement that gave the Czech and German “nations” a kind of non-territorial autonomy. In order to function, the compromise required all citizens who did not belong to the landholding nobility to register in one national cadaster or the other. They then could not change cadasters at a later date. Stourzh, King, Zahra, and others have all argued persuasively that this attempt to diffuse nationalist conflict unintentionally became a harbinger of dangerous developments to come, because it wrote ascription into provincial law for the first time in Austria. See especially Gerald Stourzh, “Ethnic Attribution in Late Imperial Austria: Good Intentions, Evil Consequences,” in *From Vienna to Chicago and Back. Essays on Intellectual History and Political Thought in Europe and America*, ed. Gerald Stourzh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls*.
- 37 See most recently the excellent essays in Peter Becker and Natasha Wheatley, eds., *Remaking Central Europe. The League of Nations and the Former Habsburg Lands* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2021).
- 38 Emily Greble, *Muslims and the Making of Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).
- 39 Dominique Kirchner Reill, *The Fiume Crisis. Life in the Wake of the Habsburg Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).