

Judson, P.: *The Habsburg Empire: A New History*. Cambridge–London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016. 567 p.

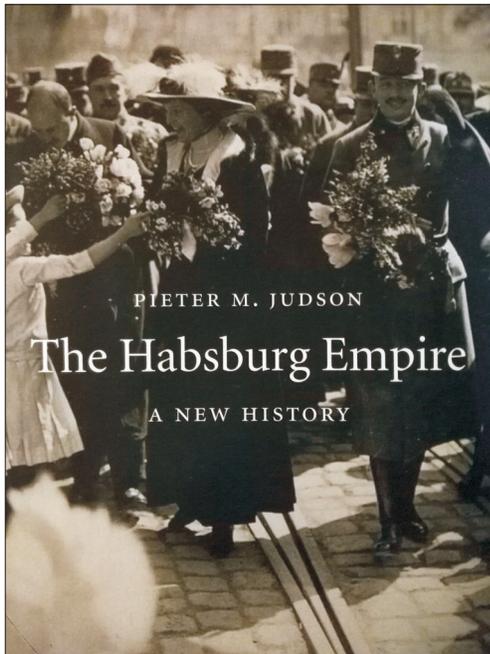
Pieter Judson's history of the Habsburg Empire from the 18th century to the end of WWI offers a grand and potentially ground-breaking retelling of modern Central and East Central European history. Starting with the administrative and institutional 'experiments' of Maria Theresa and her sons Joseph II and Leopold II in the 1700s, the study concludes with a critical discussion of the legacy of Habsburg laws and imperial practices within the successor states created in 1919 and 1920. Along the way, Judson offers insightful and compelling reinterpretations of familiar periods and events like the Metternich era, the revolutions of 1848–1849, the dualist settlement of 1867, and the other so-called 'nationalist settlements' after 1900. Though clearly a work of history, Judson's study nevertheless has much to offer geographers, and in particular historical geographers whose research focuses not just on the geography of the region, but also on geographies of empire and the relationship between imperialism, identity formation, and knowledge production more generally.

Judson admits from the outset that the periodisation of his analysis is rather standard, and that the general outline of his narrative therefore follows a

familiar pattern. What is new and novel about his presentation, however, lies in his efforts to examine how the empire itself was built and sustained not just from the top down, but also from the bottom up. Focusing on the state-building initiatives of successive generations of Habsburg leaders, Judson shows that, far from being simply distant and sometimes despotic agents of imperial oppression, the royal architects of empire managed to engage their subjects in meaningful, productive, and even progressive ways. Moreover, by opening up the various social, political, economic, cultural, and intellectual spaces necessary for the building of a modern state, imperial visionaries and technocrats created mechanisms – at times unintentionally – that allowed the people to engage directly and also critically with the structures, narratives, and practices of empire.

The result of Judson's impressive scholarly undertaking is an original and provocative retelling of the history of the Habsburg Empire in Central and East Central Europe. Approaching the history of the Habsburg Empire "from the point of view of ... shared institutions, practices, and cultures," Judson deliberately challenges "the nation-based narratives to which students of the Habsburg Empire are accustomed" (p. 4). By foregrounding what he identifies as "the common experiences of empire" (p. 14), he asks his readers to consider not only the centrality of imperial frames within the day-to-day workings of the Habsburg state and its constituent parts (both local and regional), but also empire itself as a key organising principle in the lives of its citizens. Though he does not deny that significant tensions existed within the empire, and that the state was willing to exercise its monopoly on violence and mobilise against its citizens on numerous occasions, Judson nevertheless concludes that 'empire' itself never fully suppressed the initiatives of its various peoples, but rather served as both the locus of and vehicle for the development of modern ideas, institutions, practices, and identities, even in the most reactionary times.

Though some readers (myself included) might at first glance recoil from a revisionist narrative like Judson's that appears, on the surface at least, to treat imperialism in an arguably 'positive' light, it is important to note that Judson is no apologist for empire, and is careful throughout the book to remind us that whatever progress was made under the guise of empire came at a cost. For example, reflecting on the bureaucratic and military 'force' that Emperor Francis Joseph I required in order to impose his otherwise "forward thinking program of economic, social, and cultural renewal" after 1849, Judson notes – quite



astutely – that “the price for this style of reform was the imposition of a police state” (pp. 218–219). Observations like this are prominent throughout the book, and are a constant reminder that the creators of the Habsburg Empire often found themselves having to balance “dynamic transformation” with “authoritarian control” (p. 219).

In stressing this trade-off between liberalism and authoritarianism within the Habsburg modernist-imperialist project, JUDSON argues that the Habsburg Empire was not a unique case, but rather behaved like other modern and modernising states in Europe. Despite unique developments and cultural features, the Habsburg state faced challenges similar to those of other European states, and found itself having to manage and sometimes respond forcefully to problems caused by the “increased social mobilization and increased social conflict” that came to define modernity and the modern era (p. 268). By drawing clear parallels with other state-building projects in Europe, JUDSON successfully challenges a set of stereotypes that have long persisted in studies on the Habsburg Empire and East Central Europe more generally, studies that all too often have taken claims about the region’s purported difference, backwardness, and inherent despotism as a point of departure. Noting that these assumptions and associated narratives were solidified in the interwar period and further amplified during the Cold War (especially by scholars focused on the nationalist histories of the successor states), JUDSON advocates for a rethinking of the Habsburg case, one that is free of the distortions that have coloured so much of the scholarship to date.

From the point of view of geography, and especially historical geography, there is much to like in JUDSON’s book. Though geography itself is not an explicit category of analysis that JUDSON employs, his study nevertheless covers some key themes and developments that would no doubt be familiar to historical geographers and students of geography more generally. For example, he does a particularly fine job throughout the text of describing the transformation of towns and urban landscapes since the 18th century, especially with the explosion of industrialisation and industrial centres in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars. He also charts the growth of transportation and communication networks that were developed by the imperial state during the 19th century, noting as he does so the specific ways in which these networks facilitated economic growth and connectivity throughout the empire, thus giving it a discernable and increasingly cohesive structure.

As JUDSON makes clear, the transformation of the Habsburg Empire’s material base was part of a much broader modernist project that manifested in various ways throughout Europe, but which shared a common impulse to map the territorial expanse of the state and its various landscapes, to count

populations, to number houses and catalogue their inhabitants, to learn more about the people’s living conditions, and to work to improve the lives of imperial subjects, if only to render them more useful to the state building projects that have characterised modern history since the Enlightenment. This impulse arguably reached a pinnacle in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century projects such as the *Kronprinzenwerk* (Crown Prince Project, officially titled *Die österreichisch-ungarische Monarchie in Wort und Bild*, or The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in Words and Pictures). Initiated under the patronage of Crown Prince Rudolf, the *Kronprinzenwerk* mobilised over 432 experts who, between 1885 and 1907, produced essays for a twenty-four-volume encyclopedia “on the flora, fauna, geological character, and ethnography of each crownland” (p. 328). Drawing on Deborah COEN’s work on the development of the sciences within the context of empire (COEN, D. 2010), JUDSON suggests that the collective project of scholars working in multiple scientific and geographic fields reflected “imperial ways of thinking about space, climate, and weather patterns” (p. 328).

The relationship between science, geography, and empire building became especially pronounced by the end of the 19th century, as the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy pursued its colonial goals more and more aggressively on its eastern and especially southern borders. As JUDSON argues, by the turn of the century, Austria-Hungary’s ‘liberal empire’ came to embody a civilisational mission in the East and the South. Liberal empire builders, he claims, wrapped themselves “in the mantle of civilization,” and in so doing created and reinforced a popular orientalist or quasi-orientalist trope that “nationalists, religious activists, elite liberals, and the dynasty could all claim as their own” (p. 327). Quoting an 1895 interview with Benjamin von Kállay, Austria-Hungary’s minister of finance and administrator of Bosnia-Herzegovina, “Austria is a great Occidental Empire, charged with the mission of carrying civilization to Oriental peoples” (p. 329).

According to JUDSON, the concerted efforts of the Habsburg imperial state to connect and map its diverse territories and populations, and then to project these spatially-grounded notions of the civilised Habsburg state against the empire’s eastern and southern ‘other’, brought Habsburg citizens into new relationships with each other, as well as with the always-modernising imperial state. JUDSON suggests that the different forms of knowledge and modern spaces created by empire builders opened up both actual and conceptual conduits of power that were by no means one-way streets. Though developed as instruments of modernisation and colonisation, the tools, spaces, and discursive regimes developed by the architects of empire provided very real opportunities for individuals and communities to enter into dialogue and negotiation with the state. In

advocating for themselves, and by utilising the tools (maps and census data, for example), institutional structures, and educational practices introduced by imperial bureaucrats, people not only came to ‘know themselves’ according to the terms and categories created and imposed by the state, but also began to imagine themselves as part of a community, or more accurately a network of communities, that at its highest level was synonymous with the empire itself.

Perhaps the true value of JUDSON’S book, then, is that it reminds us that empire was not a distant backdrop against which nation-building geographers, cartographers, and scientists did their work, but rather was an important framework, not just practically and politically, but also conceptually, and even ideologically. Admittedly, geography, cartography, and related scientific disciplines are by no means the focus of his book. If anything, the impact of imperial structures on the development of science and geography within the Habsburg Empire is mentioned only briefly, or merely hinted at throughout his study. However, as he makes clear in the introduction, scholars would do well to consider his arguments when looking at the development and practices of numerous fields, “from meteorology to seismology to anthropology” (p. 8), not to mention scholarly disciplines which focused on the empire’s diverse geology and landscapes, as well as its flora and fauna, and human populations. As he notes, “the fundamental idea of a regularized and integrated imperial space shaped research questions and methodological approaches,” especially during the 19th century, when a wide range of disciplines and specialisations emerged to deal with the practical and conceptual problems of modern state building (p. 8). The scientific labour of a vast cadre of bureaucrats, scholars, and civic-minded bourgeois professionals did not merely come to “reflect” the empire as it expanded and was consolidated since the eighteenth century, but also “actively forged an explicit vision of a particularly Habsburg Empire, one that united different cultures as it promoted [both directly and indirectly] their autonomous development” (p. 8).

Despite the obvious achievements of JUDSON’S ambitious study, there is undoubtedly not enough attention paid either to geography or to Hungary itself to satisfy Hungarian geographers and historians, though in all fairness the same could be said of the rest of the former Empire’s constituent parts, including the regions that make up modern day Austria. However, as important as it is to an understanding of modern Central and East Central Europe, to complain of a lack of focus on national and even regional history and geography would be to miss the broader point of his work, namely the empire itself as a lens of analysis and understanding.

Ultimately, JUDSON’S book does not dismiss the importance of nationalism and nation-building as central categories of understanding and inquiry in

Central and East Central European history. What he opens up, therefore, is the possibility for more complicated approaches to, and nuanced questions about, this region’s road to modernity. As he convincingly argues, by the beginning of the 20th century, for a wide array of reasons, “many ideologists of empire harboured nationalist beliefs, and nationalists regularly sought political solutions within the legal framework of empire” (p. 10). Historical geographers who have looked seriously at the careers and worldviews of key nationalist geographers trained in the Habsburg Empire at the end of the nineteenth century would likely agree with JUDSON’S claim. As he stresses and attempts to illustrate throughout the book, “concepts of nationhood and ideas of empire depended on each other for their coherence. As intimately intertwined subjects, they developed in dialogue with each other, rather than as binary opposites” (pp. 9–10).

In the end, JUDSON’S compelling study reminds researchers to think outside of the nationalist ‘boxes’ that we all too often work in. To move forward as historical geographers of Central and East Central Europe, and as historians of the geography of this region, we would do well to follow his lead, and to continue to press for new critical approaches that will help us see ‘outside’ the narrow and often parochial parameters of the nation. JUDSON’S suggested frame may not be palatable to every researcher, and there is certainly much to be debated with regards to his approach and conclusions, but a work like this deserves careful consideration, and in my mind is certainly a step in the right direction. I have no doubt that JUDSON’S book will prove to be an important work that scholars in many fields will consult and discuss for years to come.

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REFERENCE

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