

A Comparative History of Local Resilience?

On the ERC Consolidator Grant Project ‘Negotiating Post-Imperial Transitions: from Remobilization to Nation-State Consolidation (Nepostrans)’*

Gábor Egry 

Institute of Political History, H-1114 Budapest, Villányi út 11–13; egrygabor@phistory.hu

Abstract. The classic accounts of the history of the Habsburg Empire emphasized the importance of the conflict of nationalities and alleged that national oppression was the root cause of the Empire’s dissolution in 1918. Based on new results, however, the Nepostrans ERC project has raised two important issues: caution against the idea of all-pervasive nationalisms, and the perspective that the disappearance of Austria–Hungary was not a clear and sharp break and that continuities were just as important as ruptures. Built on concepts like ‘phantom boundaries’ (*Phantomgrenzen*) and New Imperial History, the focus of the Nepostrans ERC project is a dual one. The first aspect centers on the transformation of imperial society, governance, and institutions that emerged due to the war effort, and the second on the transition out of the imperial framework as the key consequence of the latter, with special attention given to social and institutional consequences and the enabling of new state-building efforts at a local level. The fundamental issues addressed by the project—running from 2018 to 2023—are the various relations between statehood and society at the local and regional levels that are examined in nine cases: Tyrol, Hradec Králové (Königrätz), southern Banat, Znojmo (Znaim), Prekmurje (Muravidék), Rijeka (Fiume), Kolomiya (Kolomea), Baia Mare (Nagybánya), and the outskirts of Budapest. The cases were primarily selected to represent typical variations in the social and political configuration during investigated period, 1917–1930.

Keywords: Austria–Hungary, Habsburg Empire, state, society, transition, continuity, regional level, local level, *histoire croisée*

Genesis and inspirations

The history of the Habsburg Empire has become a hotbed of historiographic invention in the last two decades. The classic accounts of its history emphasized the importance of the conflict of nationalities and alleged national oppression as the root cause of the empire’s dissolution in 1918. This older historiography often claimed that the idea of

* The full title of the Nepostrans project is ‘Negotiating post-imperial transitions: from remobilization to nation-state consolidation. A comparative study of local and regional transitions in post-Habsburg East and Central Europe, 1917–1930 (Nepostrans).’

empire was beyond salvation from the moment nationalism emerged as the dominant political idea on the territory of the Habsburg realm. This interpretation was no different regarding the classic historiography applied to dualist Hungary.¹ Most recent works—whose intellectual origins their authors usually connect with István Deák's *Beyond Nationalism*, a study of the Habsburg officer corps and its dynastic rather than national allegiance—have turned against this classical view: a historiographic response which has retrospectively been labelled 'revisionist'.² Inspired also by the sociology of ethnicity,³ and the decidedly anti-nationalist stances of these historians, the revisionist school's focus was not imperial or state-level nationalist politics, but the various interactions between nationalist politics and society at different spatial levels.

Based on these new results, these historians have raised two important issues, both informing the design of the Nepostrans ERC project. First, they have recommended caution in the application of the idea of all-pervasive nationalisms which corrupted the imperial state organism to such an extent that the Habsburg Empire collapsed under its own weight when faced with new political movements whose victory was "inevitable". Instead, historians of the revisionist school point out the prevalence and strength of non-national identifications—the ability of the state to maneuver around and use nation-centered politics for its own purposes (e.g., when crafting parliamentary majorities) and to use examples from other nation-states for projects of imperial reform and renewal.⁴ Second, the disappearance of Austria-Hungary was not as clear and sharp a break as has been portrayed in the historiographies of its successor states. Not only were most of the successor states multi-ethnic in character—just like the Habsburg Empire—but former imperial bureaucrats, their expertise, and practices were very often co-opted by nominally post-imperial governments. As a result, the post-imperial successor states carried over numerous imperial laws and bureaucratic-administrative traditions, and relied precisely on the politics of ethnic discrimination which classical historiography accused the Monarchy of.⁵ Thus, from the contemporary revisionist perspective in Habsburg Studies, continuities were just as important as ruptures.⁶

1 For a polemic expression of this classic view, see Evans, "Remembering the Fall of the Habsburg Monarchy." See also: Connelly, *From Peoples into Nations*.

2 Deák, *Beyond Nationalism*; Berecz, "Recepciótörténeti széljegyzet Tara Zahra tanulmányához."

3 Brubaker and Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity';" and Brubaker et al., *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity*.

4 Deák, *Forging a Multinational State*; Becker, "The Administrative Apparatus under Reconstruction."

5 Judson, *The Habsburg Empire*; Gyáni, ed., *The Creation of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy*; Varga, "The Two Faces of the Hungarian Empire."

6 A very recent example is: Reill, *The Fiume Crisis*. See also: Ordasi, "Dominique Reill's the Fiume Crisis"; Ordasi, "The Fiume Crisis."

Probably the most important change in perspective brought about by these revisionist works was scaling down the analysis and trying to discern social processes and phenomena through and with the help of localized case studies. These reinterpretations were not only confined to the works of American and British revisionist historians in Habsburg Studies. Concepts like ‘phantom boundaries’ (*Phantomgrenzen*) emerged in German-language historiography and were tested and proven by the examination of long-lasting continuities in social attitudes and institutions in successor states, putting both former Habsburg and non-Habsburg regions into focus and comparison. At a more local level, the development of inter-ethnic Jewish–Czech–German relations in Prague was analyzed by mobilizing a huge wealth of source material on one (albeit large) urban municipality, revealing everyday patterns of interactions which were embedded in certain institutional milieux at a sub-state spatial level.⁷

Another important recent historiographic development that helped frame the work of Nepostrans was New Imperial History. Its proponents⁸ contend that the usual differentiation between modern maritime and colonial empires on the one hand and continental empires on the other that grew out of medieval and early modern dynastic conglomerates is misleading. Continental composite empires modernized relatively quickly, learned from the practice of modern states, and the core of their imperial practices was not dissimilar to that of nineteenth-century maritime colonial powers. Most importantly they define empire—again relying on (historical) sociology—through three key characteristics of imperial rule, equally important for both types. First, asymmetric rule, i.e., the imperial center ruled over peripheries or provinces not through uniform institutions and laws but rather through legal-institutional pluralism and differentiation. Second, imperial rule was often mediated through and shared by local elites who were co-opted by the center. Finally, the spaces of an empire were connected and integrated not only through infrastructure, but also through imperial personalities who accumulated specific knowledge that was applied to the goals of an empire and who were equally capable of acting as the representatives of that empire in different provinces.⁹

Built on these insights, and capitalizing on the conceptual tools offered by these historiographic trends, the focus of Nepostrans is a dual one. The first aspect centers

7 Hirschhausen et al., eds., *Phantomgrenzen*; Koeltzsch, *Geteilte Kulturen*.

8 Hirschhausen, “New Imperial History?,” Leonhard and von Hirschhausen, *Empires und Nationalstaaten*; Leonhard and von Hirschhausen, eds., *Comparing Empires*; Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*.

9 See von Hirschhausen, “New Imperial History?” From this perspective, dualist Hungary was closer to an empire than is usually assumed. See: Egry, “Regional Elites, Nationalist Politics, Local Accommodations.”

on the transformation of imperial society, governance, and institutions induced by the war effort, and, second, on the transition out of the imperial framework as the key consequence of the latter, with special attention given to social and institutional consequences and the enabling of new state-building efforts at a local level. We hypothesize that the ways in which the imperial model of rule conditioned and integrated local societies—together with the quite significant social changes experienced during the war—defined how local societies dealt with the challenges posed by the reconfiguration of the state, resulting in local societies' explicit embrace of nation-statehood and its push for a more uniform and more homogenized state and society. Importantly, this is an assumption that may be applied to the pre-1918 Kingdom of Hungary too, allowing for easier integration of the Cisleithanian and Transleithanian halves of late imperial Austria–Hungary (1867–1918) into the research frame, thus also offering examples that may be contrasted with the successor states which emerged out of the entire territory of the Empire.

Thus, the fundamental issues the project examines are the various relations between statehood and society at the local and regional levels, the ways these were negotiated, and how these interactions affected both social and political transformations—understood as longer-term and long-lasting changes—and the process of transition on these territories; the latter perceived as a set of intended changes that were supposed to shift state, society, and economy from one structural arrangement to a markedly different one (in this case from empire to nation-state, whether republican or monarchic or otherwise).

Design and structure

During the past four years (2018–2022, plus a ten-month extension due to the COVID-19 pandemic, lasting until the end of 2023), a nine-member team has been working on nine different localities and regions that experienced the transition out of Austria–Hungary and into its various respective successor states. The regions were primarily selected to represent typical variations in social and political configurations during this period (1917–1930), although also to avoid re-doing work on localities or regions that has already been treated generously by international historiography. (See the profile of the team members on the project website www.1918local.eu and www.nepostrans.eu.) Of the nine case studies, Tyrol is the largest compact region with a rural and religious population and politics, and is comparatively easy to contrast with the Italian-annexed southern part of this former Cisleithanian crownland (*Kronland*). The area around and including Hradec Králové (Königrätz) in eastern Bohemia was multi-ethnic and also the site of a process of industrialization which encompassed several social groups and integrated the area into the European economy. Similarly,

southern Banat was a prosperous industrial region where, while not as localized as in Hradec Králové (Königrätz), transnational capital dominated the economy and the former military border created a specific social group with strong dynastic identification. The area around Znojmo (Znaim) on the border between Lower Austria and Moravia was of strategic importance for rail transportation, featuring strong agriculture and important urban centers where twin processes of embourgeoisement and proletarianization were accompanied by region-centered attempts at ethnic and class self-organization. In contrast to Znojmo (Znaim), Prekmurje (Muravidék) was an agricultural backwater of Hungary. While the post-1918 period saw the disappearance of large landowning elites in Prekmurje (Muravidék), the region conversely became an object of competition for rival national political projects within Yugoslavia. Further south, the littoral straddling Rijeka (Fiume), from northeastern Istria to northwestern Dalmatia, offers an example of local societies that transitioned under the manifest influence of military state-building efforts and, simultaneously, a second fundamental political change in the annexation of the western littoral by the Kingdom of Italy and the establishment of fascism in the early 1920s. The easternmost regions of the former crownland of Galicia, Kolomiya (Kolomea), represent another case of a rural society in transition; one which found itself on a new international border marked by military conflict and occupation, though marked by an exceptional Jewish presence whose characteristics differentiated the region from otherwise similar ones. The city of Baia Mare (Nagybánya) (and, to a certain extent, the Romanian parts of the erstwhile Maramureş [Máramaros] County) represents, on the one hand, a case of an industrializing city with strong traditions of a privileged municipal status and, on the other, an area where society was dominated by a multilingual and multireligious nobility tied by kinship relations who nurtured this tradition actively. Finally, the outskirts of Budapest serve as an example of a suburban and submetropolitan region which was connected with the metropole (Budapest) but was still a periphery in relation to this center with several differentiating political, social, and institutional consequences.

These cases do not exhaust all of the types of regions that composed the Habsburg Empire and its successor states. However, when combined with literature on other cases, the regions at the center of Nepostrans's work offer the first possibility for new research into imperial transformation and post-imperial transition at the local level. The work of the project has thus enabled meaningful comparisons among cases that are similar in scale but different enough regarding their status and position before and after 1918. They also represent cases from different varieties of nation-states in terms of politics, ideology, and economic conditions. In order to organize our research, then, the analyses work through a sequence of four key themes. For each key theme, we devise a conceptual framework with the help of

secondary literature, then we look at examples of preexisting analyses, and then present our own findings annually at a public conference and then among ourselves at an intensive team workshop.

The first key theme of *Nepostrans* was ‘the state’—more specifically, how the state apparatus underwent changes during the war as a result of mobilization efforts (1914–1918) and afterwards as a consequence of national state-building efforts (1918–1930). Given our focus on local and regional scales of analysis, our primary concern is how these processes affected local societies, how they reacted, and how these processes were co-constituted by the agency of local societies. By using analytic heuristics like ‘adaptation’, ‘adjustment’, and ‘informality’, our research has become sensitive to different means of preserving continuity with the imperial period across our cases, often as a means of maintaining stability in a rapidly changing (even deteriorating) local situation. Out of this, we have been able to make convincing claims regarding the appearance of “uneven statehood” as a feature of the process of post-imperial state succession; a phenomenon which seems to have emerged across all cases, although driven by different factors in different directions relative to the local specificities of each case.¹⁰ The second key theme was ‘the elites and their challengers’; that is, individuals and groups who had access to different types of capital which enabled them to control or contest key institutions and decisions at the local level. By exploring administrative elites and political personnel active below the national or state level, our research in this work package revealed the significance of, for example, local politicians who did not necessarily have clout in the center but could shape local and regional policies, as well as the paradoxical role of business elites in the centers who managed to salvage their business empires on the periphery. Thus, in this case, several scales of analysis and their connections became visible simultaneously, even showing the intermediary connections to other informal economic empires (e.g., investments by German and French capital) fixed on Southeastern Europe. The third theme was ‘ethnicity’. In this package, we explored how the transition was defined by the idea of the nation-state, and our work confirmed the conclusions of the literature on national indifference and everyday ethnicity.¹¹ For our fourth and final work package, we are currently working on ‘local discourses of transition’, looking at the ways in which local actors discursively reflected on the transition itself and situated their small worlds within larger ones.

The final analysis to come is imagined to be more than just connecting these sequential results. A comparison of these cases as entangled histories¹² is planned.

10 See the thematic cluster “Experimenting with the State? Post-Habsburg State-building and Local / Regional Societies,” *Südost-Forschungen* 79 (2020): 1–149.

11 See: e.g., van Ginderachter and Fox, eds., *National Indifference and the History of Nationalism*.

12 Werner and Zimmermann, “Beyond Comparison.”

The challenge is the conceptualization of the crossing itself, which is imagined as the basic unit of analysis in entangled or ‘crossed’ histories. In contrast to the most frequent use of this concept, it is not just another variety of transfers or separate histories connected by the fact that they happened at the same time and in the same space. Instead, entangled history focuses on what it labels as a crossing—i.e., the interaction or interference *itself*, whether constituted by the entanglement or crossing of historical or social processes, events, institutions, or persons at a specific moment and in a given space. The result of which is, however, not some combination of the elements of the crossing, but rather the changes *themselves* which continue to characterize the separate elements henceforth.

Expected outcomes – methodological innovation

As such, one of our expected results is also of methodological nature: a first large-scale testing of the concept and method of entangled history on the territory of the former Habsburg Empire. This result is also important, as it shows how looking at historical processes and devising a typology on the basis of entangled history or *histoire croisée* could differ from what a more traditional analysis focused on social history would yield. This is not simply to say that *only* the changes occurring at a given moment or those which induced the unfolding of certain social developments over a longer period may be included into the analytic frame. Rather, the analysis is about the crossings themselves; the way that their constitutive historical phenomena interacted in this short but intense period; and how these different interactions contributed to the outcomes we see later in the interwar period, during World War II, and after.

Thus, we expect to show (or, after the publication of *The Fiume Crisis*, rather confirm) the utility of looking at moments of rupture not only as vantage points for looking forward, but also as peepholes into the past. Likewise, the continuities revealed by the contrast of focusing on ruptures often make clear the practices, informal institutions, or habits that are—often deliberately—obscured by the use of ‘official’ discourses that legitimized the contemporaneous ideological representations of states and societies. To put it another way, answers to questions about how local societies worked in these moments of intense transformation, or immediately afterward in periods of transition, could also reveal how these societies operated in earlier, more stable periods.

A systematic cataloguing and typology of local transitions is also of importance for the historiography of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe more broadly. It offers us a chance to rethink how we can craft a narrative of macro-regional history that is neither a combination of national ones placed next to one another, nor

one that is based only on *longue durée* social processes that were similar enough throughout the region to provide a unifying framework and a single homogenizing narrative. Instead, local stories of imperial continuity and resilience may shift the focus to lower-level units of analysis and present historians with material that provides a foundation for a narrative that combines the stories of these units in a way that highlights the internal heterogeneity of nation-states as well as cross-border commonalities and shared histories, attributes agency to the peripheries and their people—including the constitutive role of the middle class during the late imperial period¹³—, posits informality as a structural stabilizer of societies and states, and conveys historical experiences that explain how states which failed to realize their envisioned ideal of statehood survived and ones that got close to it collapsed.

Literature

- Becker, Peter. “The Administrative Apparatus under Reconstruction.” In *The Habsburg Civil Service and Beyond. Bureaucracy and Civil Servants from the Vormärz to the Inter-war Years*, edited by Franz Adlgasser and Fredrik Lindström, 233–57. Vienna: ÖAW Verlag, 2019. doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvggx26b.14
- Berecz, Ágoston. “Recepciótörténeti széljegyzet Tara Zahra tanulmányához.” *Regio* 25, no. 2 (2017): 43–50. doi.org/10.17355/rkkpt.v25i2.160
- Brubaker, Rogers and Frederick Cooper. “Beyond ‘Identity’.” *Theory and Society* 29, no. 1 (2000): 1–47. doi.org/10.1023/A:1007068714468
- Brubaker, Rogers, Margit Feischmidt, Jon Fox, and Liana Grancea. *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Burbank, Jane and Frederick Cooper. *Empires in World History. Power and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.
- Connelly, John. *From Peoples into Nations. A History of Eastern Europe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. doi.org/10.1515/9780691189185
- Deak, John. *Forging a Multinational State: State Making in Imperial Austria from the Enlightenment to the First World War*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015. doi.org/10.11126/stanford/9780804795579.001.0001
- Deák, István. *Beyond Nationalism. A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps, 1848–1918*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Egry, Gábor. “Regional Elites, Nationalist Politics, Local Accommodations. Center-Periphery Struggles in Late Dualist Hungary.” In *Österreich-Ungarns imperiale*

13 For the concept of “middle-class empire,” see: Göderle, “Postwar: The Social Transformation of Empire.”

- Herausforderungen. Nationalismen und Rivalitäten im Habsburgerreich um 1900*, edited by Bernhard Bachinger, Wolfram Dornik, and Stephan Lehnstaedt, 333–53. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019. doi.org/10.14220/9783737010603.333
- Evans, Robert J. W. “Remembering the Fall of the Habsburg Monarchy One Hundred Years On: Three Master Interpretations.” *Austrian History Yearbook* 51 (2020): 269–91. doi.org/10.1017/S0067237820000181
- Gindserachter, Maarten van and Jon Fox, eds. *National Indifference and the History of Nationalism in Modern Europe*. London: Routledge, 2019. doi.org/10.4324/9781315145402
- Göderle, Wolfgang. “Postwar: The Social Transformation of Empire in 19th Century Europe. Scientific Knowledge, Hybridity and the Legitimacy of Imperial Rule.” *Acta Histriae* 28, no. 4 (2020): 511–40.
- Gyáni, Gábor, ed. *The Creation of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy: A Hungarian Perspective*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2022. doi.org/10.4324/9781003195160
- Hirschhausen, Ulrike von. “New Imperial History? Programm, Potenzial, Perspektiven.” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 41, no. 4 (2015): 718–57. doi.org/10.13109/gege.2015.41.4.718
- Hirschhausen, Béatrice von, Hannes Grandits, Claudia Kraft, Dietmar Müller, and Thomas Serrier, eds. *Phantomgrenzen. Räume und Akteure in der Zeit neu denken*. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2015.
- Judson, Pieter M. *The Habsburg Empire: A New History*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2016. doi.org/10.4159/9780674969346
- Koeltzsch, Ines. *Geteilte Kulturen. Eine Geschichte der tschechisch-jüdisch-deutschen Beziehungen in Prag (1918–1938)*. Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2012.
- Leonhard, Jörn and Ulrike von Hirschhausen, eds. *Comparing Empires. Encounters and Transfers in the Long Nineteenth Century*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011.
- Leonhard, Jörn and Ulrike von Hirschhausen. *Empires und Nationalstaaten im 19. Jahrhundert*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011.
- Ordasi, Ágnes. “The Fiume Crisis: Life in the Wake of the Habsburg Empire. By Dominique Kirchner Reill. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.” *Hungarian Historical Review* 9, no. 4 (2020): 734–38. doi.org/10.38145/2020.4.734
- Ordasi, Ágnes “Dominique Reill’s the Fiume Crisis: Living in the Wake of the Habsburg Empire.” *H-Diplo Roundtable XXIII-30* (2022): 17–19. hdiplo.org/to/RT23-30
- Reill, Dominique K. *The Fiume Crisis: Life in the Wake of the Habsburg Empire*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2020. doi.org/10.4159/9780674249714

- Varga, Bálint. “The Two Faces of the Hungarian Empire.” *Austrian History Yearbook* 52 (2021): 118–30. doi.org/10.1017/S0067237820000545
- Werner, Michael and Bénédicte Zimmermann. “Beyond Comparison: *Histoire croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity.” *History and Theory* 45, no. 1 (2006): 30–50. doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2303.2006.00347.x

