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# Questioning the Wilsonian moment: the role of ethnicity and nationalism in the dissolution of European empires from the *Belle Époque* through the First World War

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## ABSTRACT

This dossier aims to problematize the widespread understanding of ethnic cleavages as the hard core undergirding national conflict. As such it questions the rise of ethnic nationalism during the late nineteenth century as the direct cause of the dawn of Europe's 'oppressed peoples' after 1918. The different contributions evaluate the status of the First World War as the breakthrough moment of Wilsonian self-determination within the multi-ethnic states and empires in Europe. In this respect they investigate the recent powerful thesis propounded by scholars of national indifference in Central Europe that it was the unprecedented disruption of the Great War that politicized ethnicity as never before and made it into a marker of groupness rather than a mere social category, to use Rogers Brubaker's terms. The articles in this dossier also contribute to recent investigations that focus on how European empires tried to accommodate nationalism and how nationalist movements in and outside of Europe used the disruption of the war and Wilson's plea for self-determination to ask for independence. These articles demonstrate how the specific developments of war and revolution produced particular understandings of the general idea of self-determination. The Wilsonian discourse as such had a breakthrough in 1918 when the destruction of Austria-Hungary generally became accepted as an Allied post-war goal. Movements world-wide adopted self-determination as a goal and standard, but as this dossier demonstrates, all kinds of actors used Wilson's words for their many purposes, such that one cannot speak of a coherent and meaningful Wilsonian moment.

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The great continental empires of Russia, Austria-Hungary, Germany and the Ottomans all collapsed as a consequence of the First World War. In general, their downfall is seen as inevitable. These old-fashioned dynastic states were weaker than the more modern nation-states of Great Britain, France and the United States. Because of their multi-ethnic nature the former were supposedly less cohesive. Their dissolution into new, apparently more unified nation-states was considered to be a 'natural' outcome of the war. Most historians have even argued that the rise of national movements had already

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seriously weakened the legitimacy of these ‘prisons of peoples’ before the war. As one of the long-standing centrifugal forces in each of these empires, ethno-nationalist competition inescapably led to ethno-nationalist fragmentation and the victory of Wilsonian self-determination after the war.<sup>1</sup> This point of view dovetailed with the modernist paradigm in nationalism research. Authors like Ernest Gellner, Eugen Weber and Miroslav Hroch presented the rise of nationalism as a direct consequence of the modernization process.<sup>2</sup> In their narrative the replacement of dynastic empires by nation-states was almost inevitable. From the 1990s on this rather finalistic and top-down interpretation was questioned by scholars taking a regional or local approach.<sup>3</sup> The articles in this dossier further develop this critique. They evaluate the status of the First World War as the breakthrough moment of Wilsonian self-determination within the multi-ethnic states and empires in Europe and demonstrate how the specific developments of war and revolution produced particular understandings of the general idea of self-determination. The Wilsonian discourse did spill onto the international scene in 1918 when the destruction of Austria-Hungary generally became accepted as an Allied post-war goal and movements world-wide adopted self-determination as a goal and standard. This dossier, however demonstrates, that different kinds of actors used Wilson’s words for their many purposes, such that one cannot speak of a coherent and meaningful Wilsonian moment. In order to put this dossier into perspective, we will first present an overview of the most relevant historiographical trends.

### **Questioning the success of ethno-nationalism**

Already in the 1980s students of East-Central Europe began to challenge the clichéd image of the Habsburg Monarchy as a faltering ‘prison of peoples’. Gary Cohen, Istvan Deak and Katherine Verdery, to name but a few, argued that prior to the First World War ethno-nationalists had not yet converted the general population into Czechs, Germans, Hungarians, Italians, etcetera and that especially the Austrian half of the Habsburg state was not doomed to fail.<sup>4</sup> In the early 2000s this critical line of research was further developed in the scholarship on national indifference, which in itself was heavily indebted to Rogers Brubaker’s critique on the reification of ethnicity and nationhood.<sup>5</sup> Brubaker warned against conceptualizing the nation as a real group, and instead argued to view it ‘as practical category, institutionalized form, and contingent event’.<sup>6</sup>

Pioneered by Jeremy King, Pieter Judson, Tara Zahra and James Bjork, the concept of national indifference questions the mass character of nationalism in East Central Europe at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>7</sup> In contrast to the self-proclaimed success stories of nationalists, these historians argue that ordinary people were not in thrall to the nation; rather they were indifferent, ambivalent or opportunistic when dealing with issues of nationhood. These scholars have offered a well-deserved critique of the teleological slant in much of the classic literature, which has tended to describe history as the unstoppable march of the Nation. Historians of national indifference explore instead the stumbles, halts and wanderings of the Nation. They contend that nationalists not only construct the nation, but also the ethnic or linguistic ‘substrate’ on which they ground their sense of national belonging. In this sense they criticize Anthony D. Smith’s ethno-symbolist position.<sup>8</sup> Jeremy King

has called the tendency to treat ethnicity as an active generator of social change, rather than as a social category that needs explanation in and of itself, the 'ethnicist fallacy'.<sup>9</sup> As such these scholars question the pervasiveness, consistency and self-declared success of nationalism, while engaging with the fundamental question of when and how the nation and ethnicity became dominant markers of 'groupness', to use Rogers Brubaker's terms.<sup>10</sup> They argue that it was the unprecedented disruption of the Great War that politicized ethnicity and nationhood as never before and made them into markers of groupness rather than mere social categories.

Rather than a moment of acceleration of deep-rooted ethnic sensibilities these scholars view the First World War as a contingent event that created radically new conditions. From day one the Austrian state lost its citizens' confidence by turning into a military dictatorship,<sup>11</sup> waging what was in effect 'a silent war against its own citizens'<sup>12</sup> and alienating its Slavic populations by treating them 'as potential irredentists and pro-Russian fifth-columnists'.<sup>13</sup> From 1917 onwards the Austrian state was increasingly incapable to provide for its citizens and was forced to hand over a whole range of welfare functions in local communities, starting with youth welfare, to ethno-nationalist organizations. As Pieter Judson writes:

"Food shortages, labor conditions, and deteriorating infrastructure all became understood through the lens of nation as nationalist organizations gained key responsibilities for distributing aid. This development did not necessarily nationalize populations, but it did implicate the nation in daily life far more effectively than nationalist activists had ever been able to do in the years before the war."<sup>14</sup>

As such the breakdown of the Austrian state during the First World War created the conditions for the post-war dismantling of the multi-ethnic empire and interrupted pre-war processes of democratic state reform not based on mono-ethnic premises.

This line of argument has been developed in a number of recent monographs,<sup>15</sup> for instance in John Deak's *Forging a multinational state* (2014). He argues that the First World War cut short democratic experiments that local bureaucrats were conducting under the auspices of the central government. Deak's conclusion is worth quoting in full:

"The Austrian state collapsed despite its modern welfare state features, despite its expanding political participation, and despite the resources it mobilized to making the state work. In the end, we can see that the war ended a long-running process, one that would bring millions of people into political participation, formal education, cultural literacy, and economic promise. War does not make states, but it gives them reason and purpose to deepen their power, their infrastructure, and their focus. As this process took hold in the multinational empire, the purpose of the state shifted from making war to building a multinational community of educated, happy citizens. In such a polity, war did not continue the process of state making, but ended it."<sup>16</sup>

Clearly this new literature has nuanced the post-war breakthrough of national self-determination.

In January 1918, when the havoc caused by the war was felt throughout the globe, Wilson's appeal to 'every peace-loving nation' obviously made a profound impact. Erez Manela has made clear how the new notion of national self-determination reverberated across the globe. Nationalist movements in Egypt, India, China and Korea used this

‘window of opportunity’ to voice their demands.<sup>17</sup> The Wilsonian moment had a large impact in many parts of Europe as well, but not in the sense it has often been portrayed. It was not merely a moment that intensified pre-war processes of national and ethnic identification.

Scholars of national indifference have shown the contingency of the Great War in relationship to nationhood and ethnicity. The Wilsonian moment was not the inevitable vindication of ancient ethnic sensibilities, nor the necessary culmination of late nineteenth-century ethno-nationalist tendencies. In the same vein these scholars have contested the overstated contrast between Eastern Europe as a hotbed of ethnic nationalism versus Western Europe as the cradle of a composed civic nationalism. This dossier also wants to bridge this binary by questioning the teleological narrative of ethnicity and nationhood and by seeking out imperial, non-ethnic legacies. In this respect it connects to the recent reevaluation of the relationship between imperialism/empire and nationalism/nation. While in earlier scholarship these were often conceptualized as binaries, scholars like Siniša Malešević and Pieter Judson have recently argued that empire and nation actually coproduce each other.<sup>18</sup> Within the Habsburg Monarchy, nationalists had built up their own empires within the empire, and therefore also had a stake in working within the strictures of empire to increase their political and economic influence and power. In this sense it is also clear that the idea of separate statehood is not a product of a long-harbored anti-imperialist nationalism erupting in the Wilsonian moment but rather the result of specific wartime developments.

The different contributions in this dossier investigate to what extent the ‘awakening’ of ‘oppressed peoples’ after the Great War was the contingent outcome of a sudden shift during the war rather than the structural result of a slow maturation of nineteenth century ethnic sensibilities. Did war or revolutionary upheaval open up a window of opportunity for nationalist movements which otherwise would have remained closed? Did the war politicize nationhood and ethnicity to unprecedented levels by injecting violence into inter-ethnic relations that had been managed peacefully up to that moment? Was the Wilsonian language of self-determination and the attending discourse of naturalized ethnicity always beneficial to nationalists, or could it be opportunistically used by other groups in society? Did post-war Wilsonian demands for national self-determination always rely on some notion of nationality? Did the First World War interrupt prewar evolutions within the imperial framework that could have resulted in viable multi-ethnic states? For instance, was a pre-war path to home rule within the state/empire interrupted in Ireland and across imperial Austria? To answer these questions the contributions in this dossier study the relationship between nationalism, ethnicity and the dissolution of empires from the *Belle Époque* through the First World War.

### Case-studies

The first case study by Christoph Mick focuses on the impact of the First World War on the Dual Monarchy. In ‘Legality, ethnicity and violence in Austrian Galicia, 1890–1920’ Mick shows that, partly as a consequence of the growing democratisation of the political domain, ethnic tensions between Poles, Ukrainians and Jews increased during the decades before 1914. The authorities tried to uphold the legal order and punish

transgressions, while encouraging moderate factions and pragmatic compromises between the ethnic communities. In the process a workable culture of compromise and legality developed which helped to contain and manage ethnic tensions. Immediately after the start of the war, this situation changed drastically as thousands of Ukrainians, suspected of helping or sympathising with the enemy on the Eastern front, were imprisoned and executed. Thus the Austrian authorities' distrust of a Slavic 'fifth column' introduced violence into inter-ethnic relations. Although this violence erupted from above, not from below and although most measures were taken by army and state officials, Ukrainians primarily blamed local Poles and Jews for falsely denouncing them. The Russian occupation of parts of Galicia and the subsequent 'liberation' by the Austrian troops in the early Summer of 1915 further exacerbated ethnic tensions. The turning point, however, would arrive in 1917. The provisional government that came to power in Russia after the February Revolution promised that Poland would become an independent state. And after the October Revolution the American President Woodrow Wilson also supported this idea. This meant that most Polish citizens within Galicia became aware that a victory of the Allied Powers would be the quickest way to create their own nation-state. In November 1918, when the defeat of Austria was imminent, it was clear that compromises would no longer be accepted. In the following months Galicia was violently contested by Polish and Ukrainian forces. In the end the Second Polish Republic had the upper hand.

In "Universal Freedom" and the Balfour Declaration: Watershed Moments for Radical Jewish Politics' Jan Rybak shows that 1917 also was a turning point for revolutionary Jewish socialists and nationalists, with a focus on Poale Zion, the international Marxist-Zionist Jewish workers party. Together with Wilson's announcement of the right to self-determination two other events were crucial: the Balfour Declaration promised international support for the creation of a Jewish Homeland in Palestine, while at the same time the Bolshevik revolution in Russia created a new socialist state and promised universal emancipation. Reactions to these two simultaneous events and the opportunities they provided show how activists felt increasingly forced to choose between their national and their revolutionary affiliations, as the two concepts came ever more to be seen as mutually exclusive. While many activists stayed loyal to their ambition to create a homeland for the social and national emancipation of the Jewish masses, others gradually abandoned the Zionist dream and went over to the newly founded Communist Parties. The actual decisions taken by the majority of activists largely depended upon the specific local conditions. Thus, in Russia and Vienna Jews were welcomed by the revolutionary left, while in Galicia pogroms and a lack of support from the local gentile labour movement forced Poale activists to collaborate with other Jewish organizations in order to protect their communities. As a consequence, they largely remained loyal to the Zionist ideals. The final split in Poale Zion was produced in the summer of 1920. A number of activists who had previously aimed for affiliation to the Bolshevik cause eventually gave up their Zionist programme entirely in order to participate in the wider communist movement.

Jasper Heinzen's contribution, 'Making democracy safe for tribal homelands? Self-determination and political regionalism in Weimar Germany', makes clear that Wilson's plea for self-determination even had a large impact in the German heartlands. The Wilsonian discourse was used by Hanoverian 'ethno-regionalists' not to demand

independence, but to free themselves from the Prussian dominance and to reorganize the federal structure of the German state along tribal/regional lines. When in 1866 many north-German states, including Hannover, were annexed by Prussia, this was not welcomed by all inhabitants. Supporters of the deposed King of Hannover founded the German Hanoverian Party, which together with the Catholic Centre and the Social Democrats formed part of an active opposition within the new Reichstag. After the disastrous management of the First World War and the subsequent collapse of the German Empire, 600,000 people signed a petition demanding the secession of Hannover from Prussia, but as an integral part of a larger German state. At about the same time around 60.000 men volunteered for the Hanoverian civil guard, which would protect the homeland against a Bolshevik takeover. In March 1920 some of its members even tried to seize control of the local government offices during the failed Kapp Putsch. Secession from Prussia was justified through the language of self-determination that had been introduced by Wilson, although others emphasised the 'racial' superiority of the pure Germanic 'tribes' of the Western parts of the country vis-à-vis the Prussians, who had been 'contaminated' by their intermarriage with Slavs. Although during the early 1920s various plans for territorial reorganization of Prussia were discussed and in some territories even secessionist referenda were organized, internal differences, a lack of international support, the tense geopolitical situation and economic insecurity prevented institutional change.

'Ireland's Independence Day: The Fall of the Irish Parliamentary Party in 1918', written by Martin O'Donoghue, shows that the Wilsonian rhetoric seriously affected the internal affairs of the Allied Powers. During the crucial December 1918 elections in Ireland, the relatively new and radical Sinn Féin Party imparted a crushing defeat on the Irish Parliamentary Party, which until then had dominated the Irish political scene. This landslide, which would have major consequences for the Irish independence struggle, has generally been explained by internal factors. However, the international context was crucial. The Irish Parliamentary Party had been unable to get political concessions in return for its support of the British war effort and when in late 1918 it tried to get the endorsement of Wilson it still did not fully reject the British political framework. Sinn Féin, on the other hand, succeeded in mobilising a large number of (new) voters with a message of renewal, democratisation and nationalism. Moreover, it enthusiastically adopted the language of self-determination, while promising to defend the Irish cause at the upcoming Peace Conference in Paris. The First World War and the new rhetoric of national self-determination thus presented a window of opportunity that the party leaders were willing to use. Sinn Féin's uncompromising nationalist stance had more success among the voters than the 'provincialist' attitude of its opponent. Its victory in the elections of 1918 was a major step toward the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922. Thus, wartime developments were also crucial in Irish case.

All four case studies make clear that the First World War had a profound disruptive effect. Obviously, Polish, Ukrainian, Jewish and Irish nationalist movements and Hanoverian regionalism did already exist before 1914, but there was still broad popular support for compromise solutions within the existing political frameworks. The outbreak of the war quickly increased the appeal of more radical voices, but this did not mean that they all conveyed the same message. The rhetoric of self-determination could be used for various purposes: to argue for an independent nation-state, a homeland for a diaspora community or

the redrawing of internal borders. Moreover, only the final stages of the war constituted a real turning point. The rising numbers of casualties, the war-weariness, the economic destitution, the widespread dislocation of the population and the inadequate response of the authorities, combined with the fresh promises of both the Bolshevik Revolution and the Wilsonian discourse had a radicalizing effect. Nevertheless, the outcome was not predetermined. The choice of Paole members for either Zionism or Communism was largely influenced by local circumstances, while in the Irish case it was the vehemence of the British repression after the 1916 Easter Uprising that strengthened the support for nationalist demands. In sum, there was no straightforward Wilsonian moment leading inevitably towards national self-determination in Europe.

## Notes

1. This view is still being reproduced. E.g. Rosenthal and Rodic, *The New Nationalism and the First World War*. We use the term 'Wilsonian' in its metaphorical sense to refer to the breakthrough of the language of national self-determination after the First World War, knowing full well that president Woodrow Wilson never used the phrase 'national self-determination' in his Fourteen Points address of 8 January 1918, and that his ideal of self-government did not originally have an ethno-nationalist political intent.
2. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*; Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe*; and Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*.
3. Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials*; Augusteyjn and Storm, *Region and State in Nineteenth-Century Europe*; Cole, *Different Paths to the Nation*; Confino, *The Nation as a Local Metaphor*; Ford, *Creating the Nation in Provincial France*; Green, *Fatherlands*; Núñez Seixas and Storm, *Regionalism and Modern Europe*; Sahlins, *Boundaries*; Ther and Sundhaussen, *Regionale Bewegungen und Regionalismen in europäischen Zwischenräumen*; Thiesse, *Ils apprenaient la France*; Van Ginderachter and Beyen, *Nationhood from Below*; and Weichlein, *Nation und Region*.
4. Cohen, *The Politics of Ethnic Survival*; Judson, *Exclusive Revolutionaries*; Koralka, *Tschechen Im Habsburgerreich Und in Europa 1815–1914*; Verdery, *Transylvanian Villagers*; Deak, *Lawful Revolution*; Janos, *The Politics of Backwardness in Hungary, 1825–1945*; Stourzh, *Die Gleichberechtigung der Nationalitäten in der Verfassung und Verwaltung Österreichs, 1848–1918*.
5. Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*, 13–16. See also Brubaker, "Ethnicity without Groups"; Brubaker and Cooper, "Beyond Identity"; and Brubaker et al., *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity*.
6. Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*, 7.
7. King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans*; Bjork, *Neither German nor Pole*; Judson, *Guardians of the Nation*; Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls*; Zahra, "Imagined Noncommunities."
8. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*.
9. King, "The Nationalization of East Central Europe."
10. For a recent survey of the literature on national indifference see: Van Ginderachter and Fox, *National Indifference and the History of Nationalism*.
11. See Deák, *Forging a Multinational State*, 262ff.
12. Boyer, "Silent War and Bitter Peace," 11.
13. Beneš, *Workers and Nationalism*.
14. Judson, *Guardians of the Nation*, 227–8.
15. Cole, *Military Culture and Popular Patriotism*; and Vushko, *The Politics of Cultural Retreat*.
16. Deák, *Forging a Multinational State*, 275.



17. Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment*. See for the crucial role of ‘windows of opportunity’; Wimmer, *Waves of War*.
18. Malešević, “Nationalism and Imperialism as Enemies and Friends”; Judson, *The Habsburg Empire*. See also: Berger and Miller, *Nationalizing Empires*.

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