

## Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914-1918

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Jonathan Kwan

At the end of Miklos Banffy's entertaining panoramic novel of pre-WWI Hungary, the protagonist Count Balint takes a final tour of Transylvania before joining his regiment. It is a personal and private farewell to his childhood home and to a whole generation of Hungarian nobles, of which Balint/Banffy was highly critical. The novel ends with the telling words 'Bonczhida, May 20<sup>th</sup>, 1940'.<sup>(1)</sup> This massive ancestral castle of the Banffy family in Transylvania was gutted and largely destroyed by Nazi troops shortly after Banffy wrote those words.

Alexander Watson's compelling synthesis of the Central Powers in the First World War locates itself in the flux of Central and Eastern European history, in particular highlighting the links to later traumatic events such as the Holocaust, population displacement and official repression. In the introduction Watson asserts that '[t]he key to the tragic course of the continent's modern history lies in this region [central Europe], and in the extraordinary exertion, unredeemed sacrifices and physical and moral displacement undergone by its people in 1914–18'. (p. 1) Similarly, in summing up the book, Watson writes that: '[t]he First World War was a catastrophe for central and eastern Europe ... War had rent the fabric of the multi-ethnic societies and disastrously exacerbated racial divisions, bequeathing lasting antagonisms above all against older Jewish and new German minorities' (pp. 565–6). Like Banffy, there is a strong sense from Watson's book of an end to an old world and the birth of a new, terrible era.

Three themes underpin the book, all concerning 'the people' (rather than 'elites' or 'the military'). First is consent for the war, how it was obtained, how it functioned, how it ebbed away. Second is the escalating

violence throughout the war and its effects, both on war aims and general mentality. Third is the social fragmentation caused by the war. The focus is on the lived experience of the war – by the soldiers, the civilians, the officials – though the main frontline battles are also covered in some depth. Here the book is different from Holger Herwig's earlier work on the Central Powers, which has a more traditional focus on armies, high-level decision-making and military operations.<sup>(2)</sup>

I will discuss the book in relation to the perennial questions: Why and how did the war break out? How was it conducted? How was it won and lost? What were its consequences?<sup>(3)</sup> Many of my comments will be in relation to the Habsburg Monarchy, which is my field of research.

On the outbreak of the war, Watson provides a good summary of the machinations of July 1914, one of the most studied months in all history. Watson, like Christopher Clark, emphasizes the importance of Austria-Hungary, where the decisions for war were taken first.<sup>(4)</sup> Fritz Fischer and his school, which blamed German expansionism and militarism, are given short shrift (p. 31). The mobilization both in Austria-Hungary and in Germany went relatively smoothly and there was widespread consent, epitomized by the German Social Democrats' vote in favour of war credits. Watson's previous work on morale and volunteers serves this section well. Here, as throughout the book, Watson skillfully interweaves testimony from everyday participants to evoke the experience and realities of war.

In the Habsburg Monarchy the officials were heavy handed and overestimated the possible resistance to mobilization. In particular, the knee-jerk suppression of nationalist activity would continue throughout the war, especially from the army. Watson could have elaborated more on the political situation in the Habsburg Monarchy in the years preceding the war and how it affected the war effort. In recent years there have been a number of challenges to the 'nationalist paradigm' in the Habsburg Monarchy. The issue of consent in wartime could have provided a tool to trace continued national indifference, imperial loyalty and pragmatic linguistic and ethnic identity. There are hints scattered throughout the text about the surprising resilience of the Habsburg armies, despite atrocious leadership and almost continual defeats.

What of the conduct of war and how it was won and lost? Watson quickly broaches the subject of war crimes. German and Austria-Hungarian forces undoubtedly committed breaches of international law, but Watson also points out instances of Allied breaches. A good example of Watson's focus on the 'view from below' is his fascinating account of the small town of Allenstein in Eastern Prussia and its experience of the Russian invasion. In a few pages the reader is plunged into the panic, evacuation, and negotiations of a small town struggling to cope with enemy occupation. Watson persuasively argues that this invasion had profound effects on the psyche of the German people as well as increasing their sense of solidarity. For everyday Germans, the war was one of defence.

In contrast to the case study of Allenstein, the fall of the Przemyśl fortress in Galicia, involving the surrender of a 117,000 strong garrison, is only mentioned in passing. As Watson outlines, the invasion of Galicia and a series of Austro-Hungarian defeats provoked a refugee crisis and, predictably, a wave of anti-Semitism. In the Habsburg Monarchy, food shortages heightened national, ethnic and religious differences, and there was less evidence of solidarity than in Germany.

The war became one of attrition, both on the battlefield and at home. The blockade around the Central Powers had immediate effects, prompting a scramble for resources, not only by individuals on the home front but by whole armies. This desperation only increased as the war continued and conditions worsened. Watson is particularly good at conveying the gradual breakdown of wartime solidarity as food and survival became overwhelming, all-consuming concerns.

In particular, the war aims of Germany and Austria-Hungary were being adjusted in light of the unprecedented sacrifices. Already in September 1914 Bethmann-Hollweg had overseen a secret memorandum advocating as a general aim of the war 'security for the German Reich in west and east for all imaginable time' (p. 258). The interpretation of this aim depended on the circumstances of the time. Bethmann-Hollweg was, in fact, a comparatively moderate, pragmatic advocate of German hegemony over

Europe, proposing a mix of annexations and informal domination.

A fundamental change occurred in 1916–17. Verdun, the Brusilov Offensive, the Somme and the devastating ‘Turnip Winter’ deepened the suffering for the peoples of the Central Powers. Hindenburg and Ludendorff took over German military and, to a large extent, domestic command on 29 August 1916. It was now total commitment and total mobilization; total war in the push for total victory. Under Hindenburg and Ludendorff German war aims became maximal, especially in the East where massive annexations and extensive exploitation of land and resources were planned. Ludendorff had already supervised the notorious Ober Ost occupation (in the Baltic region) – a harsh, repressive regime focused on extracting the maximum from the region’s agricultural and human resources. Over time, Hindenburg and Ludendorff had to contend with more and more disgruntled voices in the home front calling for peace. In the final years of the war, the military leadership and the general German populace, including some within the army, began moving along separate and widening paths.

For the Habsburg Monarchy, the war aims were initially quite expansive. There was much talk of a German-Austrian *Mitteleuropa* with a reconstituted Poland and Serbia under Habsburg rule. Realities, however, began to bite sooner and harder in the Habsburg Monarchy. Along with the many military defeats, the food situation was extremely bad in Austria (not helped by a lack of co-operation from Hungary). In addition, a suspended parliament along with continued military-inspired repression drained the will of the population. As the German military radicalized, Karl I, the new Emperor of Austria-Hungary searched for a way out of the war. With continued hardship and no end in sight, the very survival of the centuries-old Habsburg Empire was now openly questioned. The Allies rebuffed Karl’s peace feelers and when his initiative became public, Austria-Hungary was forced into a subordinate role to the Germany of Hindenburg and Ludendorff.

In the final year of war Germany (and tied to it, Austria-Hungary) resembled a gambler already bankrupt, using credit it did not have, hoping against hope for a miracle. Watson succinctly writes: ‘[t]he Central Powers chose to go for broke in 1917’ (p. 467). At the end of its tether, Germany reeled from one outcome to another. The unrestricted U-boat campaign was launched but did not bring England to its knees. Instead America joined the Allies. Russia was in the throes of revolution and the breakdown of its army, eventually concluding the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which satisfied many of Germany’s territorial aims in the East. Yet the expected food relief was not forthcoming. In the end, all was staked on the final offensive in the Western Front in 1918, before American troops could definitively tip the balance to the Allied camp. Ludendorff’s tactical virtuosity and strategic neglect are well highlighted in Watson’s account.

These chapters on the course of the war are, of course, the heart of the book. Watson moves from summer campaigns to issues at home until they converge in 1918 with a collective failure of belief in a Central Powers’ victory. Amidst the account of events, Watson writes small cogent essays on key topics: battle plans, war aims, war crimes, racial thinking (especially in the East), refugees, communication between the soldiers and their families at home, the food shortages, the Hindenburg Programme (an industrial and propaganda drive to place Germany on a total war footing, which, according to Watson, was not particularly successful), and the unrestricted U-Boat campaign (Watson calls this ‘the worst decision of the war’), amongst others. Amidst this admirable detail and investigation of themes, Watson could have provided the reader with more prominent signposts in the narrative to give a firmer sense of his own interpretation of the overall course of the war.

Why did the Allies win? Watson does not directly address this point, though it is clear that the Allied blockade and overall superiority in material and manpower played a key role. Widespread demoralisation and despair in 1918 both within the military (at the front and in the Navy) and at home (amongst the population and the politicians) meant that Germany simply could no longer continue fighting. Like Tsarist Russia and the Habsburg Monarchy, the army and the people of Germany had been pushed far beyond their limits and many simply refused to fight or make sacrifices for the regime. In all three there were revolutions and the end of the ruling dynasty.

To the final question: what were the consequences? Watson mostly hints at the manifold results of such an

all-encompassing, shattering experience. In particular, he notes the difficulty of trying to apply Woodrow Wilson's principle of 'self-determination' to the intermingled and mixed population of East-Central Europe. The one word that is repeatedly used in the short epilogue is 'suffering'. Here Watson tentatively draws some links from the wartime 'suffering, and the jealousies, prejudices and violence that it spawned or exacerbated' (p. 564) with the later crimes of the Nazi time. For Watson, the peoples who had lived through the war were 'deeply traumatized'. (p. 563)

Alexander Watson has written an important book that reconfigures our understanding of the First World War and of European history. It places Central and Eastern Europe, not on the periphery of developments in the West, but at the heart of the key episodes in European contemporary history: war, refugees, population displacement, dictatorship, genocide. The book is written with verve and passion, and will be of benefit for both the general reader and academic scholars. In short, the book both sums up the historiographical field and presents an overarching narrative.

I have a number of minor points. First, is the issue of intertwining individuals into the larger picture. Watson brings out individual voices but often the big picture dominates since he wishes to present a 'total history'. Perhaps interwoven biographies within the larger canvas of the war could have illustrated individual (and family) predicaments. He does this to some extent with the Kohnstern family of Hamburg and it works well. Second, in the discussion of mass psychology, especially in 1918 and in the immediate post-First World War period, some outline of the methodology would have been helpful. How can one write of collective psychology? On what basis can it be assessed?

Finally, I'll return to the Habsburg Monarchy and some more general reflections prompted both by the book and a recent conference I organized on the First World War and Central European history, which was kindly attended by Alexander Watson. In the final session I posed two open-ended questions. First, what was the conjunction of circumstances, which led to the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy? When was the 'tipping point' in its fate? When was the Monarchy no longer a viable or realistic option? Possibly sometime in the course of 1917, as hunger deepened, Austria-Hungary became subservient to Germany and Wilson proclaimed his principle of self-determination. As Maureen Healy has demonstrated, for Vienna's starving population '1917 was the turning point'.<sup>(5)</sup> Similarly, Mark Cornwall hints at a similar time frame for the army.<sup>(6)</sup> But what about the whole Monarchy? Miklos Banffy described the Monarchy as a 'cohesive whole [depending on] a complicated web of alliances, treaties, unwritten agreements and historical relationships'.<sup>(7)</sup> When and how did it unravel? And what were the chronologies, interrelationships and important conjunction of events? For scholars on the Habsburg Monarchy more investigation of and reflection on these points would have important consequences on the historiography of the war and of the whole epoch of Franz Joseph.

Second, what responsibility does the Imperial army have for the collapse of the Monarchy? There is a double irony here. At the beginning of the war, the Chief of Staff Conrad and many in the military advocated war in order to save the Monarchy (or their idea of it). Moreover, the army has often been represented (most memorably by Oscar Jaszi) as a centripetal force for the Monarchy. Yet its incompetent field leadership led to a series of defeats and its heavy-handed attempt to control and regulate civil society contributed enormously to the sense of alienation and discontent.<sup>(8)</sup> Posing as its savior and a stabilizing influence within the Habsburg state, the army had, by the end of the war, largely brought about that state's loss of legitimacy.

Miklos Banffy was a part of one of the Habsburg Monarchy's foremost aristocratic families. Looking back in his memoirs from 1932, he evoked the end of the war in short, sharp strokes.

We passed dark, unlit stations, rumbling over screeching points and rails that seemed to cry out. It was as if we only went forward to the sobs and complaints of this lost and ruined land that seemed to have been left behind, just part of the debris of war and revolution ... The stormy

years were over, but those that followed held no pity for our homeland.[\(9\)](#)

Life was fundamentally different in Central and Eastern Europe after the First World War. What kind of caesura it was and how it linked to subsequent events will probably always be topics for historical debate. Perhaps by the centenary in 2018 there will be a clearer picture of these issues. Hopefully, Alexander Watson's book will provide a platform for further research and conceptualization of the war and its place in Central and Eastern European history.

## Notes

1. Miklos Banffy, *The Transylvanian Trilogy* (Volumes II and III, London, 2013), p. 830.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Holger Herwig, *The First World War. Germany and Austria-Hungary 1914–1918* (London, 1997). A second edition was published with Bloomsbury in 2014.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History. Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 199.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London, 2012), pp. 391–403.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Maureen Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire. Total War and Everyday Life in World War I* (Cambridge, 2007), p. 25.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Mark Cornwall, 'Morale and patriotism in the Austro-Hungarian army, 1914–1918', in *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War*, ed. John Horne (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 173–91.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Miklos Banffy, *The Transylvanian Trilogy*, p. 313.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Jonathan Gumz and John Deak, 'How to break an Empire: lessons from civil-military relations in the Habsburg Monarchy' (article – forthcoming). I am grateful to Jonathan Gumz and John Deak for allowing me to read a copy of this article.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Miklos Banffy, *The Phoenix Land* (Londo, 2003), p. 182.[Back to \(9\)](#)

### Other reviews:

Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/10/ring-of-steel-review-alexander-watson-germany-austria-hungary-first-world-war> [2]

Telegraph

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/11021508/Ring-of-Steel-Germany-and-Austria-Hungary-at-War-1914-18-by-Alexander-Watson-review-an-inestimable-service.html> [3]

Financial Times

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/67115d56-1d6c-11e4-b927-00144feabdc0.html> [4]

Wall Street Journal

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/book-review-ring-of-steel-by-alexander-watson-1416607763> [5]

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[3] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/11021508/Ring-of-Steel-Germany-and-Austria-Hungary-at-War-1914-18-by-Alexander-Watson-review-an-inestimable-service.html>

[4] <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/67115d56-1d6c-11e4-b927-00144feabdc0.html>

[5] <http://www.wsj.com/articles/book-review-ring-of-steel-by-alexander-watson-1416607763>

EVERY worthwhile new book surprises or stimulates. Alexander Watson achieves this effect by asserting that the most potent moral force in wartime Germany between 1914 and 1918 was not hate, but love – of Fatherland, comrades and relatives at the front. Community voluntary work was known as Liebestätigkeiten (‘activities of love’). Gifts sent to the front were christened Liebesgaben (‘offerings of love’). The mayor of Heilbronn declared that ‘behind the army of weapons, the army of love must now array’. A sceptic might respond that this is the sort of sentimental twaddle through which all social Austria-Hungary was considerably more repressive, reflecting its elite’s distrust of its own people. In neither state did governments introduce meaningful political reform. Instead, they offered the prospect of ‘holding out’ and ‘total victory’. Even the treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, which constituted an apparent ‘total victory’ against Russia, undermined the Habsburg regime as previously loyal Poles railed against the terms. The failure of Germany’s spring offensives in 1918 was followed by a rapid disintegration of army morale, which drifted back to the German home front as the war