

Sovereignty Transformed: U.S.-Habsburg Relations from 1815 to the Paris Peace Conference

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The sprawling geographic, linguistic, and ethnic polyglot of Habsburg Europe makes an unexpected point of comparison with the United States. Bordering, at its western extremity, the Untersee and Lithuanian-Swiss border; and, at its eastern limits, reaching Kronstadt on the Transylvanian-Romanian border, the Habsburg Empire was the economic and cultural dynamo at the heart of Central Europe. Its twin capitals of Vienna and Budapest bridged the Danube, connecting lands that ranged from Galicia and Bukovnia along the borders of the Russian Empire to Dalmatia and Croatia-Slavonia on the Adriatic Coast. Habsburg dominion encompassed 261,243 square miles at the heart of the European continent. Its *Reichsrat* admitted multiple levels of dynastic rulers and dependent kingdoms, native nobilities and imperial Archdukes, free peasants and indentured serfs, and mixed religious faiths, languages, and ethnicities. The Habsburg Crown managed to contain the various forms of national agitation that emanated from its multinational territories through a combination of indirect rule and colonial domination over its Slavic and Balkan hinterlands, and through the minimal demand of *Kaisertreu* from its subjects.

The Baltic and continental economy of the Habsburg Empire was far removed from the Atlantic World of trade and cultural hybridity inhabited by the United States. Trade between the two nations was of microscopic proportions, few treaties existed between them, and their paths never crossed militarily until Europe plunged headlong into the Great War. Yet, for all its diminutive character, Nicole Phelps' innovative

study recovers an overlooked relationship that offers a penetrating insight into the transformation of international governance and diplomatic protocol across the long 19th century. Her richly textured account of the United States-Habsburg relationship ‘demonstrates the international and transnational aspects of the construction of sovereignty’. The two nations clashed ‘over diplomatic norms’ and ‘a multitude of legal problems stemming from the migration of several million people back and forth between the two countries between the 1870s and World War I’ and over ‘their contrasting approaches to managing their diverse populations’ (p. 2). These clashes over sovereignty, and the ultimate transformation they wrought on the Great Power System, animate this diverse account.

We learn of the broad contours of this relationship in the first two chapters, which stand alone as a discrete section. These chapters trace the United States’ reluctant and glacial adoption of the norms of the Great Power System founded at the Congress of Vienna until its dismantling by the post-1919 Wilsonian international system. Phelps has an eye for the intricacies and symbolic practices of Great Power diplomacy that enforced the mutual recognition of legitimacy by nation states. American diplomats discovered many of these norms by breaking them. ‘Incidents between the United States and the Habsburg Empire’, writes Phelps, ‘created opportunities for American debates on the topic [of diplomatic custom], which in turn created opportunities for the U.S. government to adopt practices that were compliant with the norms of the system, thus furthering U.S. integration into the Great Power System’ (p. 40).

In its frequent and blundering breaches of etiquette with the Habsburgs, American domestic politics were, as ever, catalytic. Thus, as national-separatist revolutions broke open across the European continent in 1848, ebullient support of Lajos Kossuth and the Hungarian 48ers in the United States drove Washington and Vienna into conflict. Pro-Hungarian fervour in the Senate and Democratic press, stoked by Lewis Cass; State Department flirtation with the recognition of Hungarian independence in the Taylor and Fillmore Presidencies; and, finally, the latter’s 1851 ‘rescue’ of Kossuth from the Ottoman Empire on board the USS *Mississippi* precipitated a breach in relations. Only the death of Daniel Webster, a major opponent of reconciliation, averted the crisis. Keen to signal the importance of United States-Habsburg relations, Webster’s replacement, Edward Everett, negotiated to raise American diplomats in Vienna from *chargés* to ministers resident. In the process, he drew the United States deeper into the system of Great Power diplomacy.

For all the importance of formal diplomatic symbolism, however, it is also apparent that United States-Habsburg disputes were resolved most effectively through back-channels. In March 1906, for instance, Theodore Roosevelt and Elihu Root recalled Ambassador Bellamy Storer from Vienna because of his wife’s clandestine efforts to expand the Catholic Church’s influence in Europe. Convinced that ‘the inclusion of the United States in world affairs as a Great Power hinged on [the United States’] ability to behave in a manner acceptable to the existing, recognized Great Powers’, Roosevelt decided that Storer had to go. Root clumsily removed Storer without informing the Habsburg Government (pp. 95-9). Away from the public spotlight, Baron Ladislaus Hengelmüller’s long residence in Washington (1894-1913) enabled the Hungarian to leverage personal friendship into ‘future American compliance with diplomatic norms’ (p. 98). Roosevelt and Hengelmüller smoothed over the dispute at various social events ‘with relatively little damage to either individual, either government, or U.S.-Habsburg relations in general’.

These chapters make a powerful case that the mutual recognition of national sovereignty both structured Great Power diplomacy and animated the course of United States-Habsburg relations. Taken together, they are a reminder that while the United States may have desired to break from the culture of Old World diplomacy, it was often forced to accept its norms and even co-opt its power to suit its own claims to international legitimacy. With its focus on the importance of the symbolic resonances of diplomatic ceremony and social life these chapters are also a fine example of the ‘New Diplomatic History’.⁽¹⁾ Yet this focus on bilateral relations and elite diplomacy sets them apart from the chapters that follow.

Phelps’s study changes gear when she focuses on the era of mass migrations. The late 19th-century boom in transatlantic migration fuelled a transnational discussion of dual citizenship and sovereignty in a world of proliferating nationalisms. Chapters three and four scrutinise the inter-relationship between diplomacy and

state-building through the lens of this mass movement. The international state system groaned under the weight of increasing numbers of mobile subjects and citizens crossing state borders, trespassing on the legal, linguistic, and racial categories of citizenship favoured by consolidating national regimes. As the volume of unregulated movement increased between the United States and the Habsburg Empire the American Consular service expanded in kind, extending the power of its protection 'to provide services in areas where a country's citizens concentrated abroad' (p. 109). Phelps' analysis shifts into higher gear too, as the density of United States-Habsburg connections increased with the tide of transatlantic migration. 'The massive movement of people between the United States and the Habsburg Empire raised vital questions about sovereignty and citizenship,' Phelps writes, at the root of which 'was how to prove an individual's citizenship status' (p. 110).

Naturalised Hungarian- and Austrian-Americans struggled to prove their status as American citizens in the face of arrest or the Habsburg state's claims on them for military service, revealed in chapter three. Frequent, high volume migration across the Atlantic raised legal and diplomatic problems unheard of before the mid 19th century. Consulates struggled constantly to determine expatriates, repatriates, and dual citizens. American Consuls across the Habsburg Empire therefore played an important part in codifying citizenship and expatriation as they weighed the legitimacy of individual's claims to protection by the United States. Zdenek Bodlak, for instance, born in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1893 to Bohemian émigré parents, was arrested in Prague in 1913 after circulating letters that were highly critical of Austria and Germany. As punishment, Bodlak was sentenced to three months hard labour and banishment from the Habsburg Empire upon its completion. With the help of Charles Hoover, the United States Consul, Bodlak appealed the verdict, but it was upheld. In the end, Hoover was likewise content with the verdict. In so doing, argues Phelps, 'he helped align politics and physical location'. To Hoover, 'if naturalized American citizens were more interested in Austrian politics ... then they should not be able to hide behind the barrier of American citizenship' (p. 128). Phelps' work highlights that dual-citizenship was deeply problematic in a rapidly connecting world. Since individuals slipped so easily between the interstices of diplomatic treaty-making, protection was granted at the consular level on a case by case basis.

Here, Phelps is also historicising one element of the emergence of international law in this period. Many of the issues facing the consular service in Vienna were grappled with across the Continent by American diplomats. Dual citizenship, or worse, statelessness, created great confusion under the citizenship regimes of the Great Power System. In the final third of the 19th century, the United States led the way in recognising the right of expatriation. The State Department concluded bi-lateral naturalization treaties with the North German Confederation, Baden, and Bavaria in 1867; with Hesse, Belgium and Mexico (1868); Sweden and Norway (1869); Britain and Austria-Hungary (1870); Ecuador and Denmark (1872). The treaties, and accompanying Expatriation Act of 1868, were one element of a fragile consensus in the development of international law. This mass movement reminds us that the norms and practices of Great Power Diplomacy were consistently reformulated in the light of contestations it received from highly mobile non-state actors. Phelps suggests one mode for understanding the broader impact of the transatlantic debate over dual citizenship and expatriation on the Great Power System.

Protection demanded a vast consular service. The rapidly expanding Habsburg Consular service is recaptured in vivid detail by Phelps in chapter four, as she examines the difficulties its members faced in protecting Austrian and Hungarian citizens in the United States in this period. Principally, this took the form of coordinating compensation payments, protecting the property rights, and examining the working conditions of the thousands of Habsburg subjects who migrated to the United States. These transatlantic birds of passage took employment in hard labour industries such as mining, steel milling, and on the railroads where working conditions were poor and nativism, labour unrest, and injury were rife. Through an innovative use of reports of accidental death and on-the-job injuries, compensation claims, and consular circulars in Austrian archives, Phelps uncovers the voices of Habsburg migrants and the complex interaction between transatlantic migration and diplomatic service. Habsburg consuls amassed extraordinary amounts of information from a web of diplomats that stretched from New York to San Francisco, Chicago to New Orleans. Through regular *Amtstage* ('office days') and the opening of *expositurs* (branch offices) Habsburg

officials circulated germane knowledge of economic opportunities and working conditions for likely migrants from the Empire, they transmitted copies of federal laws and regulations to Vienna with a host of other material including newspaper editorials, congressional debates, and proposed legislation. It was through these avenues, much more than American projection, that Habsburg subjects gained knowledge of the United States.

Although migration has been central to proliferating transnational histories of the United States in this period, these are perspectives and approaches absent from the vast majority of this literature. *U.S.-Habsburg Relations* pieces together the structural apparatus of transatlantic migration circuits. Migrants' motives were much more than the sum of rumour, misinformation, incentive, and familial networks, but could draw on the circulation of international knowledge collected by the state. This analysis provokes further queries. How should historians conceive of consular offices as transnational spaces? What social and cultural roles did Habsburg Consulates perform for communities of expatriated imperial subjects? In what other ways did the interface between state apparatus and non-state actors and agencies shape the mass movement of the Gilded Age?

Phelps is also interested in the power that flows through these veins of interconnection, which she finds in the cultural identity politics of United States-Habsburg interactions. Habsburg consuls in the United States were 'strong proponents of a supranational, *kaisertreu* identity' in which language, religion, and social class were deemphasized, or suppressed, in favour of the political citizenship categories of either *Austrian* or *Hungarian*. Diplomatic insistence on these categories was therefore an act 'reinforcing Habsburg legitimacy in the international community' (p. 155). Yet, each time Habsburg consuls pressured the United States Government in defence of its subject's interests they encountered the limitations of transnational state building. Habsburg sovereign categories ran counter to American political culture, which identified German, Magyar, Polish, Slovak, Croatian, and Romanian speakers as racial categories, 'undermining Habsburg legitimacy and fostering the development of exclusionary racial nationalisms' (p. 211). Ironically, Habsburg consuls found that they must rely on nationalist associations such as the Magyar American Hungarian Aid Society if they were to successfully protect Hungarian subjects. In the process, Habsburg officials inadvertently supported the identity categories they hoped to oppose. Caught between two polities, Habsburg officials also blamed Magyarization efforts by the Hungarian government for the development of separatist nationalisms in the United States (p. 184-5). Cumulatively, Phelps argues, 'this racial thinking undermined the legitimate sovereignty of the Habsburg government and planted the seed for later American recognition of race-based nation-states in Central Europe' (p. 196). Rarely have the dialogic, transnational dimensions of national separatism and imperial state-building been examined in this way.

Phelps adeptly traces the nexus of race and state-building through the Great War in the closing chapters, which form the third and final discrete section of the work. Chapters six and seven are much more in the mould of traditional diplomatic history, tracking the break in United States-Habsburg relations, declaration of war, and the efforts of the Wilsonian government to negotiate the reorganisation of Central and Eastern Europe. The United States and Allied governments, as is well known, favoured the break-up of the Habsburg Empire and made various, often contradictory, concessions to groups seeking self-determination. The arc that unites this narrative is the importance of American racial categorising and its creation of the conditions for the recognition of alternate sovereignty in Central Europe. This evolved from the lack of direction in Wilson's initial policy towards Eastern and Central Europe, which opened a vacuum that enabled 'deeply ingrained American thinking about racialist categories to manifest itself' (p. 219). Competitors to Habsburg sovereignty were able to take advantage of these racial formations, making claims for their legitimacy by invoking 'a race-based sense of self-determination' (p. 220). Czechoslovak nationalists, for instance, adopted American categorisations to argue that the Czech and Slovak languages were so similar as to be almost identical. From this linguistic root, they asserted that the two groups were racially similar and possessed the same political aspirations. These were the exact arguments Wilson wanted to hear.

Wilson therefore created the opportunity for the recognition of alternative sovereignty in Central Europe. The reality of a post-war multinational Central Europe took shape gradually and was not fully completed at the Paris Peace Conference, discussed in the final chapter. The turbulence, violence, and revolutionary

ferment of post-1919 Europe emerged in this geopolitical void and was in part a product of the Anglo-American insistence on an ‘unbridgeable gulf between majority and minority populations’ (p. 264). Armed conflicts broke out across eastern and central Europe as the new states emerging from the dismantled Habsburg and Romanov Empires attempted to fix their own borders. In Budapest, Béla Kun had founded the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic. The equally short-lived Bavarian Soviet Republic had likewise raised the red flag in Munich. As the transatlantic partners attempted to create states that included the smallest number of minorities possible, the successor states they forged ‘were more inclined to work to create that homogeneity through laws, forced repatriations, and eventually “ethnic cleansing”’ (p. 264).

This racial-national essentialism also created a vast stateless population suffering in American internment camps. Four military camps in the United States housed 2,300 Austrian, Hungarian, and German civilians (mostly in Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, and Fort Douglas, Utah) and 4,000 prisoners of war. Phelps examines a number of attempts by these transnational inmates to secure release from American camps, which reveal the extent to which the United States’ commitment to racial territorial sovereignty rendered Central European citizens temporarily stateless. The Justice Department was committed to a mixed policy of repatriation and deportation of many of these individuals. In so doing, they hoped to ‘align individuals’ racial identity, citizenship, and physical location’ – the supposed pre-requisites of lasting peace (p. 270). Yet, in the post-war world of redrawn borders, individual citizenship often remained unclear. It was this ‘disregard for individual choice regarding nationality and citizenship,’ Phelps asserts, that ‘became a hallmark of the post-1919 international system, which privileged group identity and rights over those of individual people’ (p. 273).

The concept of self-determination places Phelps in conversation with the ‘Wilsonian Moment’, which ushered in the transformation and expansion of international society in the 20th century.⁽²⁾ At the heart of that process was the belief that the self-determining nation-state was the only legitimate form of sovereignty. But, as Phelps cogently demonstrates, that sovereignty was dependent on the racial-national categorising of the Habsburg Empire’s subjects. As Wilson haphazardly redrew the map of Central and Eastern Europe along ethnic and racial lines, the reader is left wondering where the region stood in the transformed global cartography envisioned by Wilson. In other words, did he ever consider the region as fundamentally post-colonial in character? What place did the empire of the Habsburgs occupy in his understanding of the structures and modes of government that animated empires worldwide? Finally, in what ways did the ethnicities of Habsburg Europe intersect with American views of the processes of ‘civilization’ – or was ‘whiteness’ both necessary and sufficient for the Habsburg successor states to be considered suitable for self-governance? Indeed, throughout the volume, this reviewer was left wondering whether American diplomats or State Department officials ever seriously considered, or even understood, the complex imperial character of Austria-Hungary.

Both international and transnational in approach, Phelps’ study is a highly calibrated examination worthy of a place on the shelves of European and American historians alike. This is a rare, non-Anglo-American account of the transatlantic transformation of international society between the end of the Napoleonic and First World Wars. Phelps unfolds a finely textured and detailed image of a tangled and complex interconnection that should prompt historians to reconsider the way in which the legitimacy of international order was asserted, reinforced, and eventually, dismantled.

Notes

1. See for instance: *The Diplomats’ World: A Cultural History of Diplomacy, 1815-1914*, ed. Markus Mösslang and Torsten Riotee (Oxford, 2008); Jenifer Mori, *The Culture of Diplomacy: Britain in Europe, c.1750–1830* (Manchester, 2011), reviewed at <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1139> [2] [accessed 15 January 2014]. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford, 2007). [Back to \(2\)](#)

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