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# Regionalism, Democracy and National Self-Determination in Central Europe

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BRENDAN KARCH

- Rogers Brubaker et al., *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* (Woodstock, UK and Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006), 504 pp., \$29.95, ISBN 9780691136226.
- Pieter Judson, *Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007) 332 pp., \$60.50, ISBN 9780674023253.
- Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1948* (London and Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008) 279 pp., \$24.95, ISBN 9780801477607.
- Caitlin E. Murdock, *Changing Places: Society, Culture, and Territory in the Saxon-Bohemian Borderlands, 1870–1946* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010) 275 pp., \$75.00, ISBN 9780472117222.
- James E. Bjork, *Neither German nor Pole: Catholicism and National Indifference in a Central European Borderland* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008) 304 pp., \$85.00, ISBN 9780472116461.
- Andrea Orzoff, *Battle for the Castle: The Myth of Czechoslovakia in Europe, 1914–1948* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) 302 pp., \$27.95, ISBN 9780199843466

The end of the Cold War and the accompanying easing of archival restrictions in former communist countries have created a veritable renaissance in historical literature on the region in the last two decades. The fall of the Iron Curtain has subsequently thrown into doubt the historiographical salience of a strict East–West divide and prompted the resurgence of analytic concepts such as Central Europe or East Central Europe. The former term, defined famously but imprecisely in the 1980s by Milan Kundera as those lands ‘culturally in the West and politically in the East’, has grown no easier to delimit with the march of European integration and democratic stability

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across most of the 'central' part of the continent.<sup>1</sup> The latter term is, in some senses, less problematic, since the 'East' in East Central Europe is generally understood to exclude those areas in current-day Germany or Austria. Yet the region's eastern and southern borders are still much disputed.

The works under review do not explicitly tackle where Central Europe ends and begins. Yet they largely share a consistent analytic frame that orients Central Europe thematically at the core of debates about nation state formation in modern Europe. Their collective findings suggest that Central Europe is a primary site to question the limited popular appeal of nation-building and the inherent tensions between mass nationalism and democratisation. In particular, the works here largely adhere to a specific form of transnational history that deals less with cross-border networks and more with the embeddedness of non-national frames among regional or local populations. A glance at the titles under review reveals a near-complete lack of nation states. From Carniola to Cluj, Upper Silesia to Lower Styria, and across Bohemia and Moravia, the map of Central Europe gleaned from these studies is fundamentally one of regional divisions.

These geographic frames in part answer a recent historiographical call that is continental in scope: to reconstruct a 'Europe of regions'. Celia Applegate has argued that modern European history can benefit from a return to the region as the basic unit of analysis, allowing for an emphasis on 'the ambiguities and the instabilities of the nationalising project'.<sup>2</sup> Central Europe proves particularly fruitful in such studies because, while many of the most studied regions in Western Europe (such as Basque territory or Brittany) are marked by peripheral tensions with one central regime, more easterly areas have endured competition between and among several states and disparate ideological regimes. The city of L'viv, an extreme case, was subject to the rule of Austria, Russia, Germany, Poland, the Soviet Union and Ukraine, all within a period of less than eighty years. While many of these studies have been classified as 'borderlands' history, such a distinct geographic category in Central Europe may be more confusing than enlightening. Even in the strictest terms of political geography, nearly everywhere served as a border zone at some point or another in the tumult of the twentieth century. Warsaw was a scant 40 km from the border with Greater Germany during World War II. More importantly, the basic analytic interest which most often drives scholars to borderlands – their complication of narratives centred on a single nation state – can be fulfilled in Central Europe nearly regardless where one looks on the map.

Regional frames in Central Europe also serve another historiographical purpose: they form temporal bridges across great political ruptures. Regimes come and go in Central Europe, but regions have often persisted as coherent categories of political, economic or cultural analysis. Regions can prove a powerful ordering force for group belonging a century after the collapse of regimes. In tracing these legacies, the works

<sup>1</sup> Milan Kundera, 'The Tragedy of Central Europe', *New York Review of Books*, 26 Apr. 1984, 33–8.

<sup>2</sup> Celia Applegate, 'A Europe of Regions: Reflections on the Historiography of Sub-National Places in Modern Times', *The American Historical Review*, 104, 4 (1999), 1179.

here suggest that the decades before World War I hold a disproportionately large importance: it was during this period that urban expansion and rural modernisation rapidly transformed cities and villages; that literacy became, in many regions, nearly universal; that expanding suffrage and constitutional freedoms created vibrant civil societies; and that denser transport and communication networks expanded horizons for the average citizen. It is these processes which stand out most concretely as setting the terms of regional identification and political contestation. It is what allows Romanians in Transylvania today to claim their Habsburg heritage makes them more civilised than their co-nationals in Wallachia who were under Tsarist Russian rule (Brubaker, 231ff.) It is also what allows the European Union to declare Saxony and the north-west Czech Republic a Euroregion decades after the destruction of its cross-border diversity (Murdock, 202–3).

By emphasising the durability of non-national identifications, these regional studies accept implicitly that nationalising projects were highly contingent and not fated to succeed. The assumption that Czech, German, Polish, or Hungarian speakers were destined to join their respective nations – that each was a fenced-in garden sprouting up exclusively from its own ethnic seeds – has been debunked for over a generation.<sup>3</sup> The works continue this trend by depicting the contingency or ambiguity of ethnic identities as commonplace in several Central European regions, driven by widespread bilingualism and intermarriage, Catholic or socialist politics, and movements for regional autonomy. Some of these works have also given life to a new analytic concept: national indifference. Rather than narrating the successful nationalisation of Imperial and nation state citizens – the making of peasants or workers into Germans or Czechs – the concept of indifference focuses on those for whom nationalist schools, parades, associations or politics held limited appeal. While recapturing the agency of those defined by apathy presents methodological challenges, not least in the gathering of evidence, a focus on national indifference allows for a reframing of the relationship between democracy and national self-determination. If large swathes of the population proved largely uninterested in defining themselves nationally, then the ‘self’ in ‘self-determination’ can no longer simply be defined as ‘the people’. Popular will certainly helped to create nations at particular times and historical junctures. Yet in order to legitimate the nation as the primary ordering force for political rights and obligations in Central Europe, activists relied just as often on forced measures of categorisation and control as they did on democratic appeals.

This analytic focus on the tension between nation-builders and their targets of nationalisation stands against still-popular models of nationalism which argue for the inevitable and willing self-division of populations into national camps in the modern era. A good portion of the theoretical ground-clearing on the issue has

<sup>3</sup> Gary Cohen, *The Politics of Ethnic Survival: Germans in Prague, 1861–1914* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981). Jeremy King calls the continued assumption that nations developed from mutually exclusive ethnic stock ‘ethnicism’. Jeremy King, ‘The Nationalization of East Central Europe: Ethnicism, Ethnicity, and Beyond’, in Maria Bucur and Nancy M. Wingfield, eds, *Staging the Past: The Politics of Commemoration in Habsburg Central Europe, 1848 to the Present* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2001), 112–152.

been achieved by the sociologist Rogers Brubaker. In *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town*, Brubaker puts over a decade of prior theory-building on nationalism to the test, conducting with fellow researchers a study of the 'experience and enactment of ethnicity and nationness' in modern-day Cluj (xvii). His study takes as its theoretical departure point a strong critique of 'constructivists' – a category headlined by Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson.<sup>4</sup> If constructivists have declared that nations are not primordial ethnic agglomerations, but rather 'imagined communities' born of modernity, they nonetheless typically assume that nations exist as collective actors with their own agency. Moreover, according to Gellner, these nations were inevitable outcomes of modernity: 'the age of transition to industrialism was bound . . . also to be an age of nationalism,' he asserted.<sup>5</sup> The Hungarians, the Czechs, the Poles and the Germans: these are the collective groups who typically form the protagonists of modern Central European history. 'But who are these people?', Brubaker asks. Their salience as group actors with their own internal coherence and agency is largely a facade, he argues. Nations are not stable group actors in the way that political parties, associations or other defined agents of history are. Moreover, ethnicity, as the most common basis of nationhood in Central Europe, is also a phantasm:

ethnicity is not a thing, an attribute, or a distinct sphere of life; it is a way of understanding and interpreting experience, a way of talking and acting, a way of formulating interests and identities. Nationhood, similarly, is not an ethnocultural fact; it is a frame of vision, a cultural idiom and a political claim. (358)

In this model ethnicities and particularly nations are not collectivities, but categories. They are the shifting discursive targets around which historical actors (primarily convinced nationalist activists) attempt to organise and institutionalise disparate loyalties. This reorientation removes nations as autonomous subjects of history, instead framing them as flexible containers into which nationalist politicians, newspaper editors, teachers and other actors conceptually divide populations for purposes of cultural-political legitimacy.

How does this theoretical shift translate into a methodological one? Brubaker argues that a first major step is to avoid 'viewing nationalist politics from a distance, and from above', since such a perspective 'fosters a kind of optical illusion' by overemphasising the claims of nationalists, and conflating their own wishes with those of society at large (167). His alternative is to engage in close ethnographic observation in order to discern when ethnicity matters in society, and when it fails to matter. By letting nationalism 'emerge' as a topic in interviews rather than pre-figuring its importance, Brubaker finds that most everyday interaction among residents of Cluj fails to be expressed or experienced in national terms (195–7). Hungarian

<sup>4</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983). These two authors have been among the most influential in what is now a huge literature on the 'modern' origin of nations that is too large to survey.

<sup>5</sup> Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 40.

speakers, as a statistical minority who are expected to know Romanian, experience the salience of ethnic belonging much more strongly than the majority of Romanians; but even among Hungarians, Brubaker concludes that ethnicity functions only as an 'intermittent' structuring force for assigning meaning to everyday interactions (208). While it may be safe to speak of a Hungarian church or Hungarian school, one cannot assume that 'Hungarians' in Cluj act as a unified group. Even near-unanimous support among the Hungarian minority for their own ethno-national political party does not guarantee any sort of consensus on political matters. Instead of assuming stable loyalties, Brubaker frames nationalism in terms of 'public performances and private enactments' – and concludes that 'most Clujeni do not frame their cares and concerns in ethnic terms' (360–3).

Brubaker's conclusions suggest that ground-level ethnography can reveal an alternative social world in which nations play only a peripheral role. Yet how is the historian, without access to interview subjects, able to construct a nuanced evaluation of nationalism's role in the contours of everyday human interaction? Such a task is fraught with perils – as revealed in Brubaker's work itself. The first half of his study, as an excursus on Transylvanian history, reveals the limitations inherited from nationalist historiographies. Brubaker was forced, as he himself admits, to focus on the 'conspicuously visible (and audible) forms of ethnicity and nationalism' – that is to say, 'those who claim to speak and act in the name of the "nation"' (360). These are simply the most accessible sources. As a result, Brubaker's history struggles to avoid the chief fault he so deftly criticises in his sociological analysis – a groupist conception of nations as unified agents in history. The intricacies of everyday 'performances' of nationalism rarely entered the historical record, and the nationally apathetic by definition did not muster the energy to organise for their interests. Historians seeking ways around these gaps have found two main outlets in the historical record: they can turn to the dominance of alternate loyalties (such as Catholicism, regionalism or Imperial patriotism); or they can deconstruct nationalists' projects by locating their rhetorical contradictions, unfulfilled agendas and botched recruitment efforts. These strategies – which form the methodological foundation for the historical works under review here – suggest that the limited popular appeal of nationalism must be weighed against the supposed success of nationalists as mutual causal factors in the political formation of nation states in Central Europe.

### **Nation-building before World War I**

The very notion of national difference first had to be inscribed onto nineteenth-century societies whose logic of communal belonging placed little importance on such distinctions. Narrating the tensions and failures in the forging of national divisions is the central goal of Pieter Judson's *Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria*. Judson claims that these 'frontiers' in the Habsburg Austrian crown lands – areas which nationalist census and map readers determined as embattled transition zones between German- and Czech- or

Slovene-speaking regions – were actually an invented category of nationalist activists. Local residents, accustomed to bilingual communication and intermarriage, lived in a subjective frame that was incompatible with the idea of national classification in the first place (3–5). Large swathes of these ‘frontier’ populations failed to identify with nationalism as a way to make sense of their lives and communities, and had little awareness of living in an embattled national zone until activists arrived to tell them. Judson is compelled by limitations in evidence to focus not on these nationally indifferent, but rather on the nationalist activists themselves, particularly on their contradictions or failures. These activists, mainly German ones in Judson’s work, formed competing national associations in order to build schools, inculcate teachers, resettle desired ethnic stock and promote nationally minded tourism. But their reach in converting ‘frontier’ populations into nationally loyal citizens proved limited. Nationalist associations failed to attract mass numbers of rural residents; settlers funded by nationalists would intermarry with the ‘wrong’ ethnic group; and tourists rarely changed their vacation plans in favour of more nationalist sightseeing. Even nationally framed violent acts, while disruptive to local communities, only rarely led to long-term rancour. Through a reading of the failures and disjunctures of these activists, Judson depicts out-of-touch nationalists projecting ill-fitting divides on frontier societies largely indifferent, and at times even resistant, to such division.

One of the key strengths of Judson’s work is his argument that both nationalisation and resistance to it were wedded to modernising state-building in Austria. This clarifies two separate confusions: the first is that nationalism, especially in its most radical forms, tended towards atavism. Nationalists may have proclaimed primordial communal ties as the basis for their nations, but their projects relied on the new professional and leisure classes – ‘teachers, civil servants, physicians, railway employees, telegraph operators, credit officers, and tourists’ – as simultaneous bearers of social progress and national awareness (74). White-collar workers, often raised in far-flung corners of Austria, dominated nationalist groups in the Austrian language frontiers. The state-financed improvement projects in education and infrastructure which brought activists to these rural locales in the first place also allowed them to fuse together their professional and national missions. The second, related confusion is that indifference to nationalism can be chalked up to pre-modern ignorance among the ‘unawakened’. This was certainly the opinion of nationalist activists, who saw indifference as ‘misguided resistance to the forces of progress’ (68). Regional, religious or local identifications have long been slotted into modernisation theory as vestiges of pre-industrial life steamrolled by the mechanical forces of progress. Yet Judson and other authors reclaim these non-national loyalties as eminently adaptable to modern societies, and as durable alternative markers for group loyalty that not only preceded national identities, but in some cases outlasted them.

Moreover, as Judson shows, these modernising projects were not necessarily opposed to Habsburg multinational Imperialism. Austria-Hungary, long portrayed by historians as the dilapidated house torn apart by its various nationalities, has recently

been revived as a much more modern and durable structure.<sup>6</sup> Not only was it able to elicit considerable non-national patriotic loyalty from its citizens, but its various national movements had a much more symbiotic, rather than parasitic, relationship with the central Imperial structure. National groups in fact jockeyed for a better position for their nation *within* the Habsburg political structure, and thus ‘competed to demonstrate their loyalty to the emperor’, as Judson argues (9). Moreover, these same movements were beneficiaries of Imperial modernisation, channelling funds from Vienna into nationally minded ‘pet projects’ for economic development or increased literacy (88). German and Czech activists not only promoted the Austrian Empire as the federal overseer of their national projects; they also benefited from its increased civil freedoms and slow process of democratisation. Nationalist movements in Habsburg Austria needed the Empire to buttress their legitimacy and fund their nation-building projects.

Judson’s focus on nationalist activists leaves the indifferent among the population often as shadows lurking in the background, their agency barely discernable. Tara Zahra works in some senses to fill this gap in *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1948*. Zahra’s key contribution is to make national indifference ‘a central category of analysis, a driving force behind historical change in East Central Europe’ (4). Zahra is aware of the difficulty of this claim, especially since her topic – nationalist battles over children – must locate agency in the often-private decisions of families and youth. While the activists promoting national division of children, and state policies supporting division, remain front-and-centre in Zahra’s study, she convincingly frames these efforts as motivated by a desire among activists to stamp out national indifference. In this sense indifference could operate as ‘a driving force behind escalating national radicalism’ (5). Thus Zahra locates agency in the choices of everyday citizens to avoid raising their children as members of a single nation, choices which so frustrated activists that they invented increasingly forcible measures to channel children into divided national communities.

Zahra contrasts the world of everyday bilingualism and youth language exchange (*Kindertausch*) in the Bohemian lands around 1900 with Czech and German nationalist efforts to eliminate these practices. Activists claimed the moral superiority of monolingual upbringing over supposedly pernicious bilingual practices which would leave children nationally confused and thus spiritually bankrupt. As Zahra shows, nationalists received a fillip from the 1905 Moravian Compromise, which created separate Czech and German curiae for regional elections, as well as national self-administration in economic and cultural domains. Part of the Compromise, known as *Lex Perek*, circumscribed school choice based on national criteria. Students were only allowed to attend Czech or German schools if they were proficient in the requisite language (33–8). As a result of this law, an annual ritual quickly developed

<sup>6</sup> In addition to the works under review, see Daniel Unowsky, *The Pomp and Politics of Patriotism: Imperial Celebrations in Habsburg Austria, 1848–1916* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2005); Gary Cohen, ‘Nationalist Politics and the Dynamics of State and Civil Society in the Habsburg Monarchy, 1867–1914,’ *Central European History*, 40, 2 (2007), 241–78.

in which nationalists (primarily Czechs) ‘reclaimed’ children who were sent to the ‘wrong’ school. Exceptions were made only for children raised bilingually, or in cases where the child’s language skills did not align with one parent’s nationality. Moreover, the parent’s national identity was to be determined by bureaucrats and based solely on ‘objective, concrete characteristics’, rather than self-declarations (39). Questionnaires and appeals from parents reveal fleetingly but clearly in Zahra’s work that those families subject to national reclamation often had little active desire to frame their social and educational choices in terms of strict national division.

Zahra reinforces Judson’s claim that mass nationalism brought with it benefits of modernising social policy. In this case, she locates these benefits in progressive, child-centred pedagogy and more robust child welfare services. Teachers were often among the most ardent activists, and their own prestige rose in concert with nationalist efforts to professionalise the field of education. What emerges even more clearly in Zahra’s work than in Judson’s is the power of the state to usher in national divisions. By claiming that the laws and court decisions of the late Habsburg Empire already amounted to a partial ‘embrace of forced national classification’, Zahra establishes a long pedigree of forcible national division embedded in the Austrian legal structure (47). Before World War I, Czechs in Austria asserted the rights of the ethnic nation above the rights of individuals or families. This is all the more important because Czech nationalists, both before and especially after World War I, couched their project in terms of democratic rights. Yet the democratic subject to which these rights accrued was imagined as the detached national body, rather than the individual citizen. The laws prescribing national division of children’s welfare and education presumed that singular national identities were not merely a natural right, but also an obligation to the nation.

Judson and Zahra build on works over the last two decades which have added significant nuance to the picture of state power and nationalist politics in late Imperial Austria.<sup>7</sup> The antagonistic relationship presumed between a supra-national Empire and upstart national movements has been revealed as far more symbiotic. The innocence granted nationalist movements as bearers of democracy has been shattered, and the long-term inevitability of Habsburg disintegration largely debunked. These conclusions have also had the effect of normalising Habsburg history in relation to other areas in Central Europe, particularly the German Empire. Much of the change has come from recent developments in the historiography on the German East which refocus attention on regional borderlands. These multi-ethnic, multi-lingual zones of eastern Germany – such as southern Saxony, Upper Silesia, East Prussia or the

<sup>7</sup> In addition to the above-mentioned works, see Jeremy King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans: A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848–1948* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002); Eagle Glassheim, *Noble Nationalists: The Transformation of the Bohemian Aristocracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); Pieter Judson, *Exclusive Revolutionaries: Liberal Politics, Social Experience, and National Identity in the Austrian Empire, 1848–1914* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997); Nathaniel Wood, *Becoming Metropolitan: Urban Selfhood and the Making of Modern Cracow* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010); Timothy Snyder, *The Red Prince: The Secret Lives of a Habsburg Archduke* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

Danzig area – had previously been glossed over in favour of a dominant narrative of aggressive German nationalism vis-à-vis Poles in Posen and in occupied wartime territories. In this older narrative, the growing nationalist drive for German conquest of the East contrasted neatly with the innocence of Habsburg multinationalism. Yet this dichotomy is increasingly untenable. Two new studies in particular reveal that national politics at the regional level in eastern Germany often played out similarly to areas across the Austrian border, marked by contests between national indifference and activists pushing for national homogeneity. These works even suggest that, in specific ways, the German state meddled less fundamentally than Imperial Austria in national politics.

As Caitlin Murdock shows in *Changing Places: Society, Culture, and Territory in the Saxon-Bohemian Borderlands, 1870–1946*, in the decades before World War I national distinctions were more marginal to the cross-border region than at any time in its modern history. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, most regional inhabitants had little concept of the border separating Saxony from Austria; their sense of community rarely reached beyond their village. Only in the late nineteenth century, as rail lines and factories blanketed the mineral-rich region, increasing mobility exponentially, did the political border take on significance in discussions of citizenship, nationality and mobility. Cross-border traffic surged, primarily bringing Bohemians to the higher-wage Saxon factories to work, and Saxons to the lower-cost Bohemian stores to shop. German speakers predominated on either immediate side of the border, but the proportion of Czech speakers increased the farther one travelled into Bohemia. As these populations increasingly mixed with little self-awareness of national division, warnings from right-wing activists appeared of the dangers of assimilation, intermixing, or a flood of Slavic speakers in Germany. Despite some nationalist fear-mongering, regional authorities rarely heeded such warnings. Although it found itself at odds with Berlin, the Saxon government crafted its migration policy before World War I with maximum leeway for cross-border traffic. ‘They are no danger to the German people’, the Saxon ministry claimed of Czechs in 1911, as it resisted Prussian efforts to restrict Czech migrant labour (45). Moreover, nationalist activists’ success at political organisation paled in comparison to that of the Social Democrats. In short, efforts to nationalise the border largely failed until after World War I.

In Upper Silesia, another German border region – this one tucked into the south-eastern corner of Prussia, next to Polish-speaking Tsarist Russia – it seemed briefly as if the multi-ethnic populace might willingly divide itself into two national camps. This narrative is at the centre of James Bjork’s *Neither German nor Pole: Catholicism and National Indifference in a Central European Borderland*. As Bjork shows, the success of Polish activists in dividing the electorate along national lines just after 1900 proved not a permanent shift, but rather a temporary hiatus in a longer tradition of Catholic political unity. Upper Silesia was nearly 90% Catholic, and confessional solidarity tied together German and Polish speakers. By the 1880s the Catholic Centre Party had become the hegemonic political force in the region, thanks to its organised resistance against anti-Catholic *Kulturkampf* policies. Yet by the 1890s, with the *Kulturkampf* effectively over, regional solidarity for the Centre Party began

to fray. Bjork's narrative traces the rise of a few committed Polish activist leaders – often from outside the region – who harnessed increasing popular discontent with the more pro-Berlin Catholic Centre Party in the 1890s to 1900s in order to lead their own national political revolt. The first regional Polish nationalist was elected to the Reichstag in 1903 on the platform of 'Down with the Centre' (77). One priest, in 1906, subsequently warned of a coming 'race war', and in the 1907 German election, five of Upper Silesia's eleven *Reichstag* seats went to Polish nationalists (116). German Catholics in turn flocked to German national parties, foretelling a full political shift from confessional solidarity to national division. Yet, as Bjork shows, Polish political triumph was followed by slow decline. Amid an inability to deliver on campaign promises for economic uplift, and facing a resurgent Catholic Party, Polish nationalists lost popularity and were forced to temper their hard-line rhetoric of national division. (The simultaneous rise of Social Democracy in the region is another factor somewhat overlooked by Bjork.) Had World War I not interrupted this arc of history, it seems plausible that Polish nationalists would have continued their slow electoral decline in the region.

In contrast to many of the other works here, Bjork offers a concrete alternative to the subtractive logic of national indifference – he argues that instead of just being neither German nor Pole, Upper Silesians in this era can be defined above all as members of a resilient Catholic community. His work remains confined mostly to regional political history, making it at times difficult to discern the contours of everyday social interaction which allowed German, Polish and bilingual speakers to live together in this Catholic borderland. Even if the nationally indifferent, mostly by necessity given limitations in evidence, remain in the background, Bjork suggests that religion could serve as a more durable marker of group belonging for Upper Silesians than nationalism. His work and Murdock's study combine to achieve an integration of German-controlled lands into analytic frames mirroring the concerns of Habsburg historians. It is no coincidence that Bjork situates Upper Silesia as a 'Central European borderland', according to his subtitle. As multi-lingual landscapes subject to political instability from competing Imperial or national movements, Upper Silesia and other regions of eastern Germany have a history which more closely resembles that of Galicia or Transylvania than Hanover or Bavaria.

While both Murdock and Bjork devote attention to xenophobic Prusso-German nationalism, these right-nationalist policies do not necessarily trace an arc of German exceptionalism. Prussian anti-Polish policies, such as the Colonisation Commission or restrictions on language use, were backed by noisy nationalist pressure groups, and prompted an equally noisy outcry from Polish nationalists. But these policies were mostly marked by their utter failure to germanise the East. The authors' regional frames help to provincialise these Berlin measures by showing their underwhelming or ambiguous reception in the borderlands of Germany. Moreover, their deeper structural effects in embedding long-term national division in the legal code arguably pale in comparison to the Moravian *Lex Perek*. Even if German nationalism had state-level support from Berlin, while Austria was more typically home to insurgent nationalisms, regions in both polities exhibited a dynamic of significant indifference

or resistance to efforts at national division. In the German case in particular, the limits of centralised state policies to shape national loyalties in multi-ethnic regions are put into sharp relief. Only with World War I, as these works show, did states truly embrace more stringent and coercive measures of population division, such as border control and surveillance of minorities. Yet even the increased nationalist edge to wartime policy did not, in itself, bring about the division of Imperial Central Europe into nation states.

### **Making nations, making states**

Nearly all of the works here emphasise World War I as both a fundamental caesura and an incubator of future national conflict. Yet most find little evidence of popular national insurgencies, which have been increasingly dismissed as myths erected by Central European successor states, and instead focus on heightened state intervention in citizens' lives. Murdock puts it most clearly, arguing that, 'During the war, membership in the German or Austrian states overshadowed other affiliations for the first time' (82). For soldiers at the war front, the deadly demands of state membership were most visceral, but regulation extended to nearly all aspects of society – from passports and mobility controls, to increased social welfare, heightened censorship, greater economic regulation and new rationing. Within societies defined increasingly by disruptive state interventionism and material deprivation, what role did nationalists play? According to Murdock, borderland residents and activists 'used nationalist rhetoric situationally', at times to challenge the state, at other times to show allegiance to it (98). While all authors here would probably concur that nationalists reacted in diverse ways to new realities of state power, subtle disagreements emerge on the salience of national divisions during the war and during the subsequent remaking of the Central European political map.

Regional political calculations in eastern Germany or Austria early in the war reveal a mix of fear, collaboration and normality. Both German and Austrian state suspicion of Poles or Czechs as potential fifth columns resulted in greater surveillance and repression of national activists. Bohemia was placed under direct military administration amid fears of Czech national agitation in 1914 (Orzoff, 38). In Upper Silesia, government repression in 1914 included arrests of leading Polish nationalists. These heavy-handed government interventions, however, are contrasted with a conviction among some historians that both states, but particularly Austria, remained a faithful guardian of all its citizens. According to Zahra, 'few officials raised concerns about the patriotic loyalty of Czech speakers' in 1914 (84–5). Judson notes that even national scapegoating of non-Germans did not bring about any greater national violence on the home front than in the pre-war era. Most authors stress that military service was expected from all ethnic groups and, until the war's final months, largely delivered. These contrasting pictures – of state repression and yet a lack of national division – are not wholly incompatible. German and Austrian crackdowns mostly targeted committed nationalist activists and did not necessarily affect those

without strong national loyalties. Many regional nationalist Czech and Polish activists, moreover, actively collaborated with their home states. Adam Napieralski, a Polish newspaper magnate in Upper Silesia, earned a concession from Berlin to extend his publishing empire into occupied Poland. Like many of his Czech counterparts in Austria, Napieralski hoped at most for a federalised state granting greater cultural and linguistic autonomy, rather than full independence (Bjork, 182–3). While the picture of Central Europe during World War I is now far more complex – marked by a mix of state hubris, heightened social tensions and collaboration between nationalists and their home states – it still remains unclear how much the war accelerated national antipathies. In pushing to find national indifference, some of the works here may downplay the sense of intimidation and fear among non-Germans created by the Central Powers' heightened national chauvinism and surveillance.

Nonetheless, when Central European societies collapsed late in the war amid battlefield defeat and home front starvation, they did not crumble into neat national pieces. As unrest mounted in heavily Polish Upper Silesian mining towns, it was unclear which ideological movement would channel their discontent. Such confusions continued through the revolutions in late 1918. One leading Polish nationalist in Upper Silesia retrospectively described himself as 'a conglomerate of a socialist, a Spartacist, and a conservative' during the November Revolution (Bjork, 195). Cross-border solidarity with the newly resurrected Polish state remained mostly confined to a few activists in Upper Silesia, Bjork argues. In the former Austrian language frontiers – now often transformed into political borderlands – national self-declarations in 1918 were based more on complex local conditions and communal obligations, and less on an idealised 'freedom' to choose one's true nationality, Judson argues (229). State power, the Entente desire for post-war retribution, and historical continuities shaped borders as much as national self-determination. Upper Silesia's fate was only determined in 1921 after a plebiscite vote, which itself followed a bloody, low-level civil war under a blatantly pro-Polish, French-led occupation. Despite widespread violence and the eventual partition of the region, many Upper Silesians remained mutable in their national loyalties. The long-standing Saxon-Bohemian political border, on the other hand, serves as an example where old state boundaries trumped the 'language frontier' between German and Czech speakers, as an augmentation of German territory was out of the question. German speakers in Bohemia remained divided on their political fate: some hoped for a revival of a 'large German' ideal from the mid-nineteenth century; some advocated accession to the reduced German national state; while others were more sanguine about the new Czechoslovak state (Murdock, 104). Of course, they never had a chance to decide. If they wished to remain in their homes, the last option was the one chosen for them. As these works make clear, with the exception of plebiscite zones, few Central Europeans participated in any meaningful, democratic way in the process of national self-determination.

These regional perspectives recast the relationship between local populations and the real decision-makers in 1918: Western leaders and the émigré nationalists who had their ears. The quest for 'national self-determination' emerges in this literature

as primarily a project of activists to establish nations as discrete, non-overlapping categories for political legitimacy, regardless of popular support. In the deployment of this Wilsonian framework in Central Europe, it was the self-determination of nations themselves, as imagined by activists, rather than the wishes of people inhabiting them, that proved most salient. Elite-level politicians, then, needed to focus less on convincing their potential national flock at home, and more on convincing Western allies why they deserved nation states. This involved creative storytelling and self-presentation of national destinies. The Czechoslovak state, the most novel political creation of 1918 in Central Europe, required a particularly strong foundational myth in order to justify its existence as an agglomeration of German, Czech, Slovak and Hungarian speakers. In particular, a fable professing Czech national insurgency against Austria proved essential to the state's political legitimacy. Had the Czechs gained federalised autonomy earlier under the Habsburgs, creating an Austria-Czech-Hungary, their state would have been far more likely to incur the wrath of the Entente as a co-conspirator in World War I, much as Hungary did. Yet by fashioning itself historically as the democratic insurgent in an illiberal Habsburg Empire, the Czechoslovak state promoted itself as a tolerant, democratic and Western-minded participant in the new nation state order.

This founding myth is the departure point for Andrea Orzoff's *Battle for the Castle: The Myth of Czechoslovakia in Europe, 1914–1948*. Unlike the other works here, Orzoff's study is not regionally focused, but it is intensely local in a different way, examining the closed, elite sphere of inter-war Czechoslovakia's chancellery, foreign office and propaganda section. Her main protagonists here are the state's founding fathers, Tomáš Masaryk, who was president until his death in 1937, and the younger Edvard Beneš, who served as foreign secretary until he succeeded Masaryk, and then became an exile leader after the Nazi occupation and dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. Orzoff shows that during World War I both men, who had elite political connections and valuable foreign language fluency, worked in exile to convince Allied leaders of the Czechs' unique desire for peace and independence in a purportedly repressive Imperial Austria. Masaryk, an eminent professor in Prague, proved particularly adept at presenting a 'cosmopolitan, enlightened interpretation of Czech history' underpinned by a 'prophetic moral rectitude' and insurgent spirit dating back to the late medieval religious rebel Jan Hus (55). This narrative successfully papered over many Czechs' enthusiastic support for the Austrian war effort, and continued to structure Czechoslovakia's self-presentation on the domestic and European stage throughout the inter-war period.

In the process of analysing the infrastructure behind Czechoslovakia's mythmaking, Orzoff makes her most significant contribution: a probing of the ambiguous relationship between the myth of a democratic Czechoslovakia and the reality of unstable parliamentary rule. Masaryk, who was indirectly elected, strived to insulate his presidential office from the 'usual messiness and imperfection' of parliamentary democracy (57). With few checks and balances, Masaryk, Beneš and fellow ministers used their privileged Castle perch as a 'symbolic bully pulpit' (59). International literary clubs, Prague high society and the state's official printing press became

additional channels to communicate Czechoslovakia's self-image. The state nurtured a personality cult around Masaryk that resembled the mythmaking of Józef Piłsudski in Poland. We even learn that Masaryk and Beneš discussed a possible coup in 1926, just as Piłsudski was acting to seize power in Poland (100). The Castle fought off fascist challenges with increasingly bold attacks in the late 1920s. While showing legal tolerance for the large German and Hungarian minorities, and for Slovaks, the Castle promoted an essentially Czech national vision of its state legitimacy. It worked to exclude other ethnic groups from participation in elite, international cultural circles where the 'Czechness' of the nation state might have been undermined. With parliament often in bitter deadlock, politics largely became a struggle between two semi-constitutional power bases – the Castle and the coalition of party bosses known as the *Pětka*. A politics of compromise thus set in between groups insulated from direct electoral consequences. In the process of narrating the Czechoslovak mythmaking machine, Orzoff dissects the broader institutions of national politics to reveal a democracy which did not always live up to its own self-image.

Despite this gap between democratic mythmaking and practice, how far did Castle politics truly undermine the practice of Czechoslovak democracy? A certain tension exists in Orzoff's work between condemnations of Czechoslovakia's inter-war political system – she calls it 'far more oligarchical than democratic' (59) – and the obvious qualification that Czechoslovakia maintained fundamental democratic institutions far longer than any other inter-war Central European state. For historians of Central Europe accustomed to odious, destructive myths justifying national revenge, racial cleansing or class warfare, it may seem pedantic to criticise the most solidly democratic state in the region for mounting an aggressive public relations campaign touting its freedoms. Yet Orzoff provides a valuable reminder that democracy is an infinitely adaptable ideal, one that can take the form of technocracy or even tyranny. Czechoslovakia adopted neither of these forms, but its mythmaking proved 'usefully ambiguous', Orzoff concludes, in covering up some of the deficiencies of an unstable parliamentary system (220). It also served a crucial purpose on the international stage; as a political creation of Western powers whose defence ultimately depended on British and French goodwill, Czechoslovakia worked to depict itself as the defender of 'Western' democratic values in an unstable political region.

Some of the specific 'democratic deficiencies' that Orzoff points out are brought into sharper focus by Zahra. Policies of forcible national classification of children from the Habsburg period, such as *Lex Perek*, only increased in the Czechoslovak First Republic. German-speaking children enrolled by parents in Czech schools (in order to learn the new state language necessary for social advancement) were often forced instead into German schools in the name of national division. The constitution made 'denationalisation' illegal, and declared that children possessed 'human rights' to education in the language of their nationality (126). An emphasis on 'objective' national traits further limited room for national ambiguity. To skirt heavy-handed administrative decisions, many nationally ambiguous or bilingual families joined particular parties or associations to gain certain concessions or rights. Zahra's findings give added weight to the critique of inter-war Czechoslovakia's self-image as

a beacon of Western-style democracy. Through education and child welfare policies, Czechoslovakia subordinated individual citizens' freedoms to the true 'privileged liberal subject' of the First Republic – the collective nation (107). While these Czechoslovak policies often received state sanctioning, the main proponents of national division continued to be regionally-based activists.

Regional activists also held an excessive importance in breeding political instability along the inter-war German-Czechoslovak border, according to Murdock. The border became spasmodically represented as both an artificial divide between Germans and a necessary bulwark against further instability. Economic chaos in the early 1920s and during the Depression helped make the border a crisis zone, a site of artificial inequities and smuggling, which created calls for stricter control. New border restrictions were meant not only to control labour flows, but also increasingly to define the boundaries of Germany in ethno-national terms: German Bohemians were now far likelier to cross to Saxony than were Czechs. German Bohemians began banding together politically, representing themselves as a unified group within a newly imagined 'Sudetenland' (127). Regional nationalist activists on the Saxon side professed solidarity with Sudeten Germans. Thus, even as the political border became more rigid, nationalists imagined its future dissolution. Nazi politics exacerbated these contradictory trends. Hitler at first sought to quash Saxon-Bohemian cross-border nationalism; yet regional activists and SA guards took the lead in turning the region into a supposedly embattled national cross-border zone. Murdock presents Hitler as largely antagonistic to expansionist rhetoric until he suddenly embraced it during the Munich Crisis in September 1938 (199). But surely Hitler had few problems with these regional nationalists 'working towards the Führer' and laying the groundwork for future expansion by stoking national radicalism.<sup>8</sup> Ironically, as Murdock points out, the final push to dissolve the border required that it first be sealed off, so that false Nazi reports of atrocities against Sudeten Germans could not be disproven (195).

Nazi expansionism and dismantlement of Czechoslovakia has long marked a definitive break in nationalist policies in Central Europe, but the authors here instead depict a series of subtle shifts in new German-controlled lands. The post-Munich border was supposedly intended to finalise the partially fulfilled Wilsonian national division of 1918; yet the subsequent Nazi dismantling of Bohemia and Moravia, and then World War II, combined to make strict national divisions hard to enforce. The old border between the *Altreich* and Sudetenland continued to be patrolled, while Czechs increasingly moved into 'German' areas as wartime labourers (Murdock, 204–6). In youth education and leisure policies, Nazis relied on a long tradition of coercive national policies in Czech lands. Their efforts at germanising Czech children, however, met such fierce resistance that Nazi policy was forced to shift to the deliberate cultivation of Czech nationalism in youth policy. This 'Reich-loyal Czech

<sup>8</sup> The theory of 'working towards the Führer' stresses the desire of Nazi functionaries within polycratic state and party structures to pursue policies that anticipated and advanced Hitler's perceived goals without the leader's direct intervention. See Ian Kershaw, "'Working towards the Führer': Reflections on the Nature of the Hitler Dictatorship,' *Contemporary European History*, 2, 2 (1993), 103–18.

nationalism' blurred the lines between Czech resistance and collaboration, as Zahra shows (Ch. 8). Nazi occupation policies towards youth thus proved at times more amenable to national ambiguity than did the policies of inter-war Czechoslovakia.

Nazi efforts to foster Czech–German collaboration, however, met a mostly unreceptive audience of Czech speakers. Popular radicalisation of national opinion among Czechs under occupation caused a profound shift in tolerance of Germans: instead of an attitude of separate-but-largely-equal national co-existence, the new formula declared co-habitation with Germans impossible. This turn towards pro-Czech chauvinism also infected the wartime 'Castle myth' as delivered by Beneš while in exile (Orzoff, 199–203). It was this new attitude of complete national incompatibility that represented a final twist, but also a logical conclusion, to decades of both German and Czech activists' efforts to make national boundaries appear natural and unbridgeable. The definitive end to policies intended to control and contain national co-existence thus came in 1948, with the last major ethnic un-mixing of Central Europe. This programme of national homogenisation, carried out with political unanimity among major Czech parties, reached down to households and families, dividing children from parents in the name of saving children for the Czech nation. But as Czechoslovakia lost control of its political fate with the 1948 coup, the expulsions were elided from the myth of Czech democracy, as promoted mainly by exile groups in the West. It was in this same tradition that Milan Kundera, a Czech exile who had moved to France, could declare Central Europe 'culturally in the West and politically in the East' in the 1980s. The cultural values assumed by Kundera as embedded in Central Europe's identity were largely the ones promoted by the 'Castle myth'.

The historical processes of making and unmaking nations in Central European regions in the half-century before the First World War I reveal a different polarity than the one suggested by Kundera: not between 'Western' values of democracy and self-determination versus 'Eastern' ones of tyranny and totalitarian control, but rather between the illiberal logic of activist-led national division, and the promise of mass democratisation. The longer-term conflicts between nationalism and democratisation in Central Europe have been highlighted by the regional frames adopted in these works. The late nineteenth century brought the first major efforts at mass nationalisation, which accompanied projects of state-led modernisation. While universal education, labour organisation and mass politics inevitably heightened awareness of cultural and social divisions, these processes did not make Central Europeans into a uniform mass of committed nationalists. Battling a significant level national indifference, activists increasingly harnessed state power to classify and divide populations along national lines, using illiberal means to achieve supposedly higher ends of national self-determination. These activists were buttressed by rhetorical successes in which the nation state became the internationally accepted model for political legitimacy among 'civilised' peoples. Nationalists, in short, were winning the argument for separate national bodies, even as they encountered continued popular indifference to their project. This trend – of channelling state authority into national division – only accelerated in the inter-war period. Lurking in the background of

nearly all nationalists' efforts was a willingness to use the increasing power of states for their own ends. Indeed, the most striking continuity across this period of mass democratisation, two world wars, the downfall of empires, establishment of nation states, and countless political ruptures, was the increasing power of the state to classify and divide populations. Insofar as Central Europe has served as a test case for historians to challenge the popular appeal of nationalism, it must also serve as a test case for the willingness of states – even ones such as inter-war Czechoslovakia with liberal, constitutional foundations – to compel national divisions using illiberal means. These works suggest that these twin phenomena of national indifference and state-driven national division were in fact causally linked, as indifference drove frustrated activists to use more coercive means of state classification and division. Given these findings, the study of making nations can no longer rest on a simple narrative of democratic self-determination, but must instead probe the fraught tensions between nationalist activists, state powers and a wider public often sceptical of the agendas of both. In this sense, Central Europe can perhaps serve as a useful explanatory model for the study of modern nation state formations across the continent.