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The Future of Central European Studies

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It is obviously difficult to envision the future of Central European studies with any precision. The broader context that surrounds historians, as well as scholars in other disciplines, influences the topics and methodologies they choose. In recent years (i.e., the post-1990, neoliberal era), transnational, global, and imperialism studies have had a significant impact on the historical profession at large.[1] As David Blackbourn observed in a 2013 address to the German Studies Association, ambitious "deep history" projects that cut across multiple cultures and historical periods have recently thrived, prompting him to encourage historians of Germany to push beyond their narrow graduate training and embrace such undertakings.[2] To be sure, historians of Central Europe have adapted to prevailing trends in the discipline (discussed later), but concerns about the chronological, spacial, methodological, and topical limitations of the field have arisen. Even if scholars of Central Europe utilize different methodologies and approaches, they rarely pioneer. Rather, they latch onto the innovations that other fields have spawned instead of breaking new ground.[3]

It is most striking that the history of Central Europe appears mainly as German history (ironically, a limitation to which David Blackbourn's address inadvertently defaulted), and a *kleindeutsch* Germany at that. The remaining German-speaking regions of Europe—not to mention the numerous German diasporas—receive far less attention. In addition, historians of Germany concentrate on the tumultuous twentieth-century, as the distribution of articles in *Central European History* testifies. As Andrew Port has pointed out, the number of articles on the "long" nineteenth century has declined precipitously in recent decades (largely because notions of a German *Sonderweg* are no longer influential), while the Weimar and Nazi eras, and especially the post-1945 period, thrive.[4] Given the parallels to the 1920s and 1930s, the recent recrudescence of anti-global and anti-migration radical nationalism and the disillusion with liberal democracy suggest that National Socialism will continue to cast its shadow.[5] Current discussions do not just preoccupy historians—they also inform public discourse.

How, then, do we address these concerns? One trend deserves particular attention: the decline of the nation as the primary locus of historical scholarship, which, in the past few decades, has influenced historians of Central Europe, just as it has those working in other

[1]This is a result, in part, of the exigencies of the job market, especially in the United States; see Catherine Epstein, "German Historians at the Back of the Pack: Hiring Patterns in Modern European History, *Central European History* (*CEH*) 46, no. 4 (2013): 631–35.

[2]David Blackbourn, "Honey, I Shrunk German History," *German Studies Association Newsletter* 38, no. 2 (2013/14): 44.

[3]Andrew I. Port, "*Central European History* since 1989: Historiographical Trends and Post-*Wende* 'Turns,'" *CEH* 48, no. 2 (2015): 247.

[4]Ibid., 242–43.

[5]See, e.g., the website "The New Fascism Syllabus: Exploring the New Right through Scholarship and Civic Engagement" (www.thehistoryquestion.com).

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fields. In the first place, this has meant a reexamination of "Germany" as empire, and has resulted especially in a rethinking of the Habsburgs, as evidenced in Pieter Judson's magisterial new synthesis, *The Habsburg Empire*. In addition to challenging the nationalist paradigm that has defined so much of the scholarship on the Habsburg Empire, Judson redefines the polity as a dynamic and modernizing state that successfully negotiated a supranational solidarity among its diverse citizenries, at least until the last years of World War I. His work also calls into question Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper's argument, which highlights difference as the key characteristic of empire. Judson's work thus has the potential to spark a revision of the literature across many fields.[6] Yet, the Habsburg Empire is not the only "Germany" to be reexamined as empire, which recent work on imperial and Nazi Germany indicates.[7]

Moreover, recent stocktaking of the field—notably in special issues published by several journals—emphasizes the local and the transnational. A special issue of *German History*, "New Research from Towns and Cities in Central Europe," underscores the federalism of the German lands, which, over the centuries (with the obvious exception of the Nazi era), has underscored the formidable leverage of urban localities against state power. This is, by no means, a new development; after all, local studies have been a mainstay of the literature for decades. But new topics for investigation—materiality, agency, urban networks, and the sensory environment of cities—promise to enrich our understanding of German-speaking Central Europe as one consisting of multiple polities.[8] There is then the recent attention to German diasporas throughout the globe. Here, too, the German states of Central Europe are not irrelevant to such investigations, but studies of the local social practices and complex relationships between the new hosts and the German migrants explore the different terrains in which "Germanness" has been negotiated.[9] As H. Glenn Penny remarked after surveying the now extensive literature on Germans in Latin America, the potential for "re-spatializing" German history around dispersed national cultures (which can easily be applied to Central Europe as a whole), as well as a recognition of the diversity of German "spaces" over time, offer both a challenge and an opportunity.[10]

The related field of Holocaust studies has moved in a similar direction because, in Helmut Smith's words, the "vanishing point" of the Third Reich has shifted from 1933 to 1941. This

[6]Pieter Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016). Also see the forum on Judson's work in *CEH* 50, no. 2 (2017): 236–59, esp. Tara Zahra's comment on p. 249.

[7]See, e.g., Shelley Baranowski, *Nazi Empire: German Colonialism and Imperialism from Bismarck to Hitler* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Sebastian Conrad and Jürgen Osterhammel, eds., *Das Kaiserreich Transnational: Deutschland in der Welt* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006); Birthe Kundrus, *Moderne Imperialisten: Das Kaiserreich im Spiegel seiner Kolonien* (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2003); Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: Nazi Rule in Occupied Europe* (London: Allen Lane, 2008); Bradley Naranch and Geoff Eley, eds., *German Colonialism in a Global Age* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); George Steinmetz, *The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

[8]See the introduction to the special issue by Mark Spaulding in *German History* 35, no. 3 (2017): 353–61.

[9]Alexander Maxwell and Sacha E. Davis, "Germanness beyond Germany: Collective Identity in German Diaspora Communities," *German Studies Review* 39, no. 1 (2016): 1–15. See also the special issue "Germans Abroad: Respatializing Historical Narrative," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 41, no. 2 (2015), esp. the introduction by H. Glenn Penny and Stefan Rinke on pp. 173–96.

[10]H. Glenn Penny, "Latin American Connections: Recent Work on German Interactions with Latin America," *CEH* 46, no. 2 (2013): 393.

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has meant, ironically, that Nazi Germany—much of the reason why German history has been limited to Germany *qua* nation state—can no longer be so easily contained. The explosion of research on the epic scale of the Nazi *Lebensraum* project and on the Judeocide makes that impossible. We do not yet have a European history of the Holocaust, as Wendy Lower points out.[11] Yet, we do have a field enlarged and transformed by the opening of once inaccessible archives. This has brought more attention to the decentralization of German decision-making processes, to "ordinary" Germans and the rank-and-file, to the diversity of prisoner populations across Nazi-occupied Europe, and, especially, to the millions of non-German actors who contributed to the Judeocide and who upset the static categories of collaboration and resistance, of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders. In addition to requiring a command of multiple languages to take advantage of available sources, newer methodologies—such as the "spacial turn," which has closely analyzed the positions of local participants and *Wehrmacht* soldiers—have complicated our understanding of the motivations of these actors. In sum, the escalation of the Holocaust as an area of study is no longer simply about the genocidal decisions at the commanding heights of the Nazi regime, however important that remains. Rather, it has evolved into a broader but fragmented and decentered saga that includes the participation of millions on the ground, German and non-German, whose participation was so vital to the carrying out of genocide.

Investigations of regional, local, transnational, and global topics will likely continue, but it is worth drawing attention to another recent trend: renewed interest in fascism, which revitalizes a topic that had gone out of favor. New research increasingly emphasizes transnational exchanges among fascist movements and states. Radical nationalists, fascists, and National Socialists imagined themselves as the global wave of the future—indeed, they came close to succeeding, a point worth emphasizing in light of the current resurgence of radical nationalism, especially in Europe and in the United States.[12] Yet, the excessive concentration on the twentieth century remains a problem that needs to be addressed. This is perhaps a tall order in light of the prevailing chronological divisions between fields in European history, at least on this side of the Atlantic. Still, graduate programs might do more to encourage a concentration in German-speaking Europe that transects the boundaries of time and space. But this assumes that they have sufficient faculty to offer such a concentration, as well as instruction in the relevant languages. For the graduates of such programs who pursue teaching careers, their breadth of training, coupled with creative course design, would enable them to attract more students and counteract the presentism of many history courses. As an added benefit, a field that stipulates the mastery of a region over a longer expanse of time would potentially lead to a greater diversity of dissertation topics.

[11] Wendy Lower, "The Spacial Turn: Locating Hitler's Germany in the European Holocaust," in *The Companion to Nazi Germany,* ed. Shelley Baranowski, Armin Nolzen, and Claus-Christian Szejnmann (forthcoming, 2018).

[12] See, e.g., Daniela Liebscher, *Freude und Arbeit: Zur internationalen Freizeit und Sozialpolitik des faschistichen Italien und des NS-Regimes* (Cologne: SH-Verlag, 2009); Benjamin G. Martin, *The Nazi-Fascist New Order for European Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); David D. Roberts, *Fascist Interactions: Proposals for a New Approach to Fascism and its Era, 1919–1945* (New York: Berghahn, 2016). There are ongoing research projects as well: Patrick Bernhard, "Race and Space across Borders: Cooperation between National Socialism and Italian Fascism in the Field of Production Policies, 1933–1943"; Daniel Hediger, "The Dream of a New World Order: The Tokyo-Rome-Berlin Axis, 1931–1942."

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In the meantime, there are practical measures that *Central European History* and the Central European History Society (CEHS) might implement in response to the concern that the field follows approaches in which other fields pioneer. For instance, the editorial board of *CEH* and the executive board of the CEHS could engage in critical discussions about future, innovative directions that the journal—and the field as a whole—might take. Given the expertise and variety of specializations represented on the two boards, such a discussion would undoubtedly produce fruitful ideas that would allow the field of Central European history to pioneer rather than borrow.

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