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MEETING-REPORT

Central European History Convention

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As one of the editors of the *Austrian History Yearbook*, I looked forward to the Central European History Conference on many levels: as a chance to present new work, to meet up with professional colleagues whom I know mostly through email, and of course, to visit Vienna, a city about 5,500 miles (8,850 km) from my home that I nevertheless feel deeply attached to. Most exciting, from the perspective of the journal, was the conveners' dedication to including and supporting junior scholars in "the field" (more on this term below). The *AHY* has long prided itself on nurturing young scholars, and the conference promised to be an international smorgasbord of the most exciting new research on Central European history. Our editing team was keenly scouting for promising talent and delighted to be able to meet young scholars in person.

The CEHC is a startup. It has acquired a certain "two guys in a garage" mystique (the guys being Dominique Reill and Peter Becker, the garage being a beer garden) that immediately generated energy: something new is happening here; some have whispered that the seed of an ASEEES is now planted in Europe.[1] The *AHY*, now in its 61st year, was also once a startup. It grew out of a "mimeographed newsletter" according to its first editor, R. John Rath.[2] He penned a debut editorial in 1965 titled "Obiter Dictum"—heard in passing—which has a quaint ring now, as historians no longer drop Latin into casual conversation. Rath's description of the journal, then, if juxtaposed to CEHC now, can tell us something about the shape and geographic center of "the field." In 1965

> [i]t seemed obvious that such an active group of scholars, many of them young men, should be encouraged through some kind of a [venue] which would serve to make them aware of each other's particular interests and acquaint them with the latest research and publications in the field, both in Austria and in the United States.[3]

The importance of young scholars was vital then, as now. But notice the assumption of a field limited to Austria and the United States. At the 2025 conference, participants from Austria and North America together made up only 56 percent of the participants.[4] Who are the remaining 44 percent? Obviously, they include more than men, and bilateralism has been superseded by a conference that drew registrants from thirty-two countries. The founding editors of the journal, hoping to counter national bias, stipulated that "books written by American scholars will be sent to European historians

[1]The Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) is the US-based organization holding an annual conference at which much research on the Habsburg monarchy and its successor states is presented.
[2]R. John Rath, "Obiter Dictum," *Austrian History Yearbook* 1 (1965), 2.
[3]John Rath, 1.
[4]"CEHC Länder-Anmeldungen.numbers," statistics provided by Peter Becker.

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for review and vice versa."[5] While they were keen to establish and maintain a transatlantic equilibrium, they could not have imagined the global scope of the history that now counts as Central European.

A lasting takeaway from the spectacular three-day marathon of panels, posters, and creative projects: the writing of Central European history is now firmly located back in Central Europe itself. The mantle of academic leadership that the United States wore for so many decades now looks more threadbare. At the graduate level, the center of gravity has shifted back across the Atlantic. There was an anecdote floating around about dissertations in the 1980s that went something like this: the Austrian PhD student was assigned an archival box by the *Doktorvater* and told to catalog its contents; meanwhile, the dissertation-writer from across the ocean, not constrained by the parochial boundaries of Austrian academic *Lager* politics, was encouraged to pose compelling theoretical questions about what they found in the box. This stereotype misses the mark on many counts, not least because excellent scholarship was produced by those who were neither American nor Austrian. If the graduate work presented at the CEHC can be imagined as a roadmap for the future of the field, the creative centers of the field now sit in Florence, Prague, Ljubljana, and Budapest, as much as Vienna or New York.

For me, despite the fantastic program, the conference also brought a sense of sadness about the decline of higher education in the United States. Many of the American participants who came to Vienna were older scholars; few of the American participants were graduate students. Would that the shifting center of gravity in the field were attributed purely to the creative juices of young European historians! Instead, this is accompanied by a concomitant defunding of research in the United States and the terrible dismantling and devaluing of transatlantic relationships. The warmth, camaraderie, and respect permeating the conference in Vienna provided a cocoon; for three days, "the field" offered a reprieve from the world around us.

Maureen Healy
Lewis & Clark College

By any measure, the Central European History Convention was an impressive event. The conference brought together over 500 scholars. For three days at the University of Vienna, they were treated to presentations at fifty-five panels, ten experimental "research labs," and three keynote/roundtable sessions. Equally important work took place during the coffee breaks, at receptions, or in nearby bars and restaurants as colleagues caught up with each other's scholarship, discussed new avenues of research, and broached ideas of potential collaboration. Articles and books that appear years later often have their origins in these social venues. One of the most important aspects, then, of the Vienna conference was the simple fact that here was a common event where medievalists and modernists gathered and mingled together, where specialists of fifteenth-century Bosnia presented alongside those exploring First Republic Austria.

What might this conference indicate about the future of Habsburg and Central European Studies? Though academics are notoriously poor at reading tea leaves, most of us are convinced that one particular trend in higher education will unfortunately persist on both sides of the Atlantic. Public funding for the liberal arts in general and the study of history in particular will continue to contract. The conference, however, reflected at least one positive way in which scholars have already responded to this challenging situation by coming together, pooling their resources, and sharing an array of specialized skills and proficiencies. Let me highlight three collaborative projects on display in Vienna that may point to future developments in the field.

The largest of these undertakings is the *Managing Maximilian* project coordinated through the Austrian Academy of Sciences. Here, over twenty-five scholars have come together to examine the life and career of Habsburg emperor, Maximilian I (1493–1519), who helped fashion a dynastic image the family would carefully curate for nearly half a millennium. The team, though, seeks to push beyond Maximilian himself and present a broader prosopographical assessment of his reign as they rethink

[5]John Rath, 3.

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fundamental questions concerning governance in late medieval Central Europe. A conference workshop offered field reports from this ambitious undertaking.

A second project on display at the conference reflected continued interest in Habsburg-Ottoman relations. An international team led by Arno Strohmeyer is working to create a digital scholarly edition of Habsburg-Ottoman diplomatic sources from 1500 to 1918 (www.qhod.net). They have collected, edited, and translated letters of various embassies to the Porte alongside correspondence of selected Grand Viziers to the Viennese court.

Finally, there is a loose constellation of scholars who are broadly interested in themes of globalization. Immediately before the conference, Vienna's *Weltmuseum* sponsored a book launch of *Habsburg Encounters with Native America* (CEU Press, 2025). Some of the editors and contributors from this undertaking also presented at the conference. Overall, nearly a dozen panels made some reference to the global. New publishing initiatives are also quickly emerging, such as a venture led by Jonathan Singerton that brings approximately fifty scholars together on a project examining the global history of the Habsburg monarchy.

Ironically, we find ourselves currently in both a period of expansion and contraction. Intellectually, scholars are pushing harder against traditional disciplinary and geographic boundaries. But as the research questions become bolder and more sophisticated, funding has become ever tighter. These constraints, though, may have their own virtue. Necessity is bringing us together in new and often unexpected ways as we share resources, both intellectual and financial. In the years to come, then, it is likely we will see more collaborative work on an increasingly ambitious range of topics.

Howard Louthan
University of Minnesota

What happens when a Central European history conference takes place in Central Europe? What happens when scholars of a region convene in that region? It puts the regional focus of the scholarship front and center. We become more attuned to our environment, to a tangible sense of placeness. And in the process, we come to realize that what unites Central Europeanists is not just an abstract field ("Central European History"), but a dedication to a particular place and space.

This became especially apparent to me when I attended the Central European History Convention in Vienna this summer 2025. The first of its kind, the convention took place at the University of Vienna, in its imposing main building on the Ringstrasse. Between panels, scholars gathered in the building's grassy *Arkadenhof*, sipping on coffees while taking in the splendor of a venue that was decidedly not the convention hall of a major American hotel chain. As I chatted with colleagues among the busts lining the arcaded courtyard, I realized how starved I was of such an environment. Being there, in Vienna, at the University of Vienna, made the research feel more relevant, more alive.

As a teacher, I often think about how a classroom shapes class experiences. And as an urban historian, I often consider the effects of urban space and planning on an individual or group. But how does a conference venue—and its city—shape the experience of a conference? How does a venue shape a community? On my flight home from Vienna to Philadelphia, I kept mulling this over. Although I have been to many stimulating conferences, this one felt different—precisely because of its location.

So, how did the conference experience change? First, as a conference in Europe, scholars were more international, with Americans being in the minority. This fostered much-needed transatlantic dialogue and cross-cultural connection. Panels reflected this diversity with speakers hailing from many countries in the region.

Second, the city of Vienna became a part of the conference in a palpable way. The university's location on the Ring, its proximity to the Rathaus and Votivkirche, not to mention the short walk to the city center, were a constant reminder that we were not sitting in an ivory tower but engaged in real life in a real place. Almost all of my conversations—even scholarly ones—made note of the city in some way.

Third, the location of the conference created a sense of community. Conversations seemed less stilted and formal, and more engaging. At one point, over a meal, a colleague whom I had just met asked what I

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was eating. "A *Frittatensuppe*." He asked if he could have a bite. I offered him my spoon. And the next thing I know, we were having a conversation about Central European cuisine and its history. Another group of scholars, including myself, formed a WhatsApp group called "Vienna love fest breakfast club," an homage to the John Hughes movie (which is all about the forging of an unlikely community) and the conference's location.

So, what happens when a Central European history conference takes place in Central Europe? It creates dialogue among a more diverse group of scholars, a greater and more palpable awareness of our field's regional focus, and a profound sense of camaraderie.

Katya Motyl
Temple University

In Vienna this past summer, I often walked by the Hofburg, which stood between the CEHC and my hotel. I passed it at all hours, and by night, the usual crowds of tourists and horse-drawn carriages were nowhere to be seen. Left to themselves, the former imperial palaces appeared silent, stately, grand, and venerable. As someone who has long studied the world of the Habsburgs, I found their solidity and seeming permanence reassuring.

At the conference, I had the same response at a panel devoted to the distinguished series, *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918*. Peter Urbanitsch, who edited or commissioned many of its early volumes, told us that initial funding had come from the US-based Rockefeller Foundation and that securing contributors from beyond Austria had been a priority from the start. The series now weighs in at eighteen volumes and more than 19,000 pages, and speaker after speaker attested that it is an invaluable resource, a view I share. But I also learned that the series is neither digitized nor widely translated; it's resolutely, unapologetically analog.

Perhaps this is why I kept turning over the question raised by Tara Zahra in her keynote address: "What Good is Habsburg History When the World is on Fire?" (This was the second keynote; Peter Haslinger had spoken incisively about "Austro-Hungarian Relations" earlier in the day.) Zahra answered the question by revisiting Pieter Judson's work. *Guardians of the Nation*, she observed, encourages us not to take nationalist claims at face value or to assume that what happens on the local level is the same as what gets said in the national media and politics. Judson's work, she also stressed, highlights the deep continuities between the Habsburg Empire and the states that emerged from it.

Many of the panels I attended deepened my conviction that Habsburg history holds lessons for the present. "The Commons: Its Use and Transformation" looked at the remaking of the countryside in the nineteenth century, as forests, fields, meadows, and mineral waters that had once been collectively used and managed were broken up and passed into private hands. The panelists—Róbert Balogh, Svit Komel, and Zsuzsa Török—explored the many meanings of this transformation: for some contemporaries, the loss of the commons meant the destruction of venerable practices based on customary laws and local usages; for others, it removed an impediment to modern capitalist development. Throughout, I was struck by the parallels between these stories and the deep crisis of rural areas in our own time, with the high human cost and complex political fallout it has brought.

Another panel, "Empire in the Urban Space," looked at what first appeared to be unrelated topics: women welfare workers in Vienna in the 1930s and 1940s; civil engineers in nineteenth-century Budapest; and birth control in interwar Hungary. But presentations by Irene Messinger, Ágnes Németh, and Gábor Koloh soon revealed common themes. They demonstrated that the foundations of many durable institutions had been laid in the Habsburg monarchy and that things often viewed through a local lens—the building of sewers or rural families' decisions to have children—need to be studied in a transnational context, something that is no less true today than it was a century ago.

On the final day of the conference, I went to the recently renovated Wien Museum, where its director, the anthropologist Matti Bunzl, told us about the museum's recent renovations and redesign. Here, the links between the past and the present were more immediate, and I also learned much about housing,

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jobs, and migration in twenty-first-century Vienna. Yet I found myself spending the most time with the over-the-top, many-splendored sculptures that Georg Raphael Donner had created in the eighteenth century for a public fountain. Like the Hofburg, this was a grand monument from another era, but one that offered both resplendence and reassurance—two words that, somewhat grandly, might be attached to the CEHC as well.

Robert Nemes
Colgate University

The Central European History Convention felt less like a single conference and more like a temporary city of ideas, given the sheer scale of the program. Attendees numbered in the hundreds, and panels, held in parallel sessions of five, stretched over three full days under the common banner of "Shared pasts, entangled future." That refrain spoke to the complexity of the event in that many different scholars, eras, perspectives, and regions featured on the agenda. Academics at the early stages of their careers received preferential treatment by the organizers—headed commendably by Peter Becker and Dominique Reill. More established scholars wove common threads between panel papers as chairs handling questions or commentators offering further insight. By and large, panels served as cohesive meeting grounds for approaches, periods, and geographies, with the research labs showcasing novel research and functioning more as roundtables composed of short comments.

Finding meaning in such an array of intellectual opportunity is perhaps a dizzying challenge, but the more I reflect on the experience of the convention, the clearer the overarching slogan becomes: Shared pasts, entangled future. It speaks to not only the intellectual spirit of our discussions but also pronounces a broader truth that the histories we study are inseparable, their legacies intertwined across peoples, borders, empires, and centuries. This year will witness the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution, when a renewed period of introspection can be expected on questions of unity and identity. Historians of the Habsburg world, however, have been wrestling with these questions for decades. The empire's own pursuit to forge coherence from diversity—its elusive e pluribus unum—stands in contrast to what one US ambassador once famously derided in the nineteenth century as the monarchy's "failed" outcome: "e pluribus duo." Yet in that very tension lies the enduring fascination of the Habsburg experience that united us all, our shared past that unites the future.

In the same vein, convention organizers hosted a rather fitting tribute session dedicated to marking the close of the mammoth editorial series of *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918* with a few of its editors present and a quartet of respondents. Begun in 1973 and ending almost fifty years later, the thirteen-volume series on the reign of Franz Joseph I has proven to be an indispensable handbook that combines useful state-of-the-field summaries and new research avenues in each volume across ten all-encompassing themes. Pieter Judson, in sharing his own personal infatuation and later contributions in the series, asked the prescient question of what the series perhaps lacked from our present perspective. If the series were restarted, asked Judson, what would now be the desiderata? Two potential avenues are obvious: environmental history and global history—both of which featured prominently at the convention itself.

Environmental history in particular has become one of the most fertile and dynamic fields in Habsburg studies, linking together economic, social, and cultural history through shared questions about how humans inhabit, exploit, and imagine their natural worlds. I find it is best exemplified in Alison Frank's *Oil Empire*, published some twenty years ago, which may now be looked back on as a landmark with the convention in the rearview mirror. Several panels and one research lab showcased the richness of environmental perspectives from the extraction of natural resources to the transformation of property relations, from the modernization of food supply systems to the cultural meanings of animal husbandry. In all of these cases, the Habsburg state emerges as an environmental agent, transforming elements of the natural world into instruments of modernization and control.

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Global history is surely having its moment in Habsburg historiography. Scholars are deliberately looking for Habsburg history outside of itself. Rather than treating the monarchy as a bounded arena with occasional foreign episodes, many presenters treated the monarchy's entanglements as a part of a worldwide system as a matter of fact. Across the panels, the "global" was used to trace the outward reach and inward reverberations of Central Europe's imperial and post-imperial worlds. It framed the movement of people and commodities through trade and migration networks linking Vienna, Galicia, and the Americas; the transnational exchange of ideas through feminist, fascist, and agrarian internationalisms; the perception of Qing administrators and Southeast Asian merchants of the Habsburgs; and the diffusion of governance models via institutions such as the League of Nations. Scholars employed the global both as a scale of analysis and as a more accurate historical condition, revealing how Habsburg expertise, infrastructures, and ideologies circulated far beyond Europe, while global forces in turn reshaped local economies, ecologies, and identities.

One presentation that quite effectively merged the two fields came from Amy Millet, who explored how everyday food culture linked the Habsburg monarchy to global imperial networks. Through cookbooks, exhibitions, and advertisements featuring colonial goods like cinnamon, tapioca, and coffee, she revealed how patterns of consumption tied Central European households to global commodity trades and each product's processes of extraction and exploitation. Millet demonstrated how the imperial appetite quite literally consumed the world on dining tables across the monarchy. It is a fitting reminder that environmental history and global history need not run on parallel tracks. And if these themes were to be added to the *Habsburgermonarchie* series today, they would not require two distinct volumes—they might, as the conference itself suggested, form a single, entangled path for the field's future.

Jonathan Singerton
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

I have been researching and teaching Habsburg history for more than three decades and had never attended such a large academic gathering focused on the Habsburg lands. Hundreds of young and established historians from the region and from the United States and elsewhere shared new research, fresh perspectives, and field-shifting arguments. The Central European History Conference took place in a fitting setting: in the seminar rooms and auditoriums of the main building of the University of Vienna, on the Ringstrasse. In a time when humanities departments in the United States confront diminishing funding, program cuts, and other serious challenges, the CEHC was exciting and energizing.

One thread bound together much of the work presented as well as informal interactions between sessions: the presence and influence of Pieter Judson. The CEHC underscored the dramatic shift in our field toward a new understanding of the monarchy embodied in Judson's remarkable book, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History*. Old debates no longer seem to animate our field. No one asserted that the Habsburg monarchy was doomed to dissolution due to the inevitable growth and intensification of nationalism. Presentations referenced "national indifference" and treated nations and nationalism as contingent, ephemeral, and often weak markers of identification. Speakers explored how the governing system functioned and the ways in which those seeking change often worked to realize that change within a reimagined and revived state, instead of highlighting seeming wrong turns and missed opportunities. Papers highlighted global connections, the lives of Habsburg officials, everyday empire, human-environmental interaction, and continuities across the 1918 divide. Three special panels and the two keynotes linked Judson's work and the field of Central European history to our fraught present moment.

While Pieter Judson's academic work lent the proceedings a tangible coherence, his mark on our field as a mentor of younger scholars struck me at every moment of the conference. Pieter has worked with scores (and still counting) of PhD students as advisor or committee member—I am honored that mine was the first dissertation defense committee on which Pieter served. He has encouraged emerging scholars by inviting them to participate in workshops and conferences and to publish in edited volumes and the *Austrian History Yearbook*. He has offered his time, advice, and constructive criticism to

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countless others. At the CEHC, many prefaced their presentations with moving accounts of their relationships—personal and professional—with Pieter Judson. Judson's fellow Columbia University alumni, his graduate students at the European University Institute in Florence, and at least one scholar who worked with Pieter during her undergraduate years at Swarthmore (Tahra Zahra), attested to his generosity, graciousness, and support, as well as the lasting importance he continues to have on their lives and careers.

Pieter Judson's scholarship challenges us to make bold arguments that question inherited wisdom. He models caring and inspiring mentorship. The community of scholars gathered at the CEHC was a community forged to a great degree by Pieter Judson himself.

Daniel Unowsky
University of Memphis

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