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Preface to Habsburg's Last War: The Filmic Memory (1918 to the Present)

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PREFACE

Günter Bischof

With the exception of the artistic and intellectual flowering of the “*fin-de-siecle* Vienna,” the Habsburg Empire (“Austria-Hungary” since 1867) has received little attention by scholars in the Anglo-American scholarly world.¹ Its role during World War I has long been neglected.² The Habsburg Empire has not had a good reputation in the Anglo-American world. Little expertise existed at American universities on East-Central European history prior to World War I – and many of the British experts were anti-Habsburg. Small wonder then that President Woodrow Wilson got bad advice about the future of this region for the Paris Peace Conference in 1919.³ His selective principle of “self-determination” – not enforced in the South Tyrol question and the entire

1 Carl Schorske, *Fin-De-Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1980).

2 Notable recent exceptions are Maureen Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004); Pieter Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2016), ch. 8; Geoffrey Wawro, *A Mad Catastrophe: The Outbreak of World War I and the Collapse of the Habsburg Empire* (New York: Basic Books, 2017); John Deak, “The Great War and the Forgotten Realm: The Habsburg Monarchy and the First World War,” in: *Journal of Modern History* 86 (June 2014), 336-380.

3 Nicole M. Phelps, *U.S. –Habsburg Relations from 1815 to the Paris Peace Conference* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013), 219-274.

colonial world – led to the “Balkanization” of the region after the war. Democracy took a hold only in Czechoslovakia; the rest of the new states in East Central Europe quickly succumbed to authoritarian forms of government. “Triumphant in 1918, it was virtually extinct twenty years on,” Mark Mazower has observed: “Maybe it was bound to collapse in a time of political crisis and economic turmoil,” he adds, “for its defenders were too utopian, too ambitious, too few.”⁴

Denounced before and during the war as a “prison of the peoples” (“Völkerkerker”) by the constituent ethnicities of the empire, most of the new nation states (“successors” to the Habsburg Monarchy) fared considerably worse after the war – rid of the Emperor in Vienna, they soon had to contend with Hitler in Berlin and then Stalin in Moscow. Both the remaining democracies and the newly formed authoritarian regimes on the political right were first occupied and dominated by German National Socialism in the course of World War II and then taken over Stalin’s Soviet Union and oppressed for another two generations during the Cold War. Only after the collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War in 1989/90 did they escape totalitarian oppression. Their “transition regimes” regained their national independence, elected democratic governments, and joined “the West” (with NATO and European Union membership).

The succession states saw the end of the war 1918 as the great “rupture.” National historiographies (especially in Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia) have usually focused on the “break” with Austria-Hungary at the end of war and ignored the many continuities with the Habsburg Empire that existed in their new states on the

4 Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century* (New York Vintage, 1998), 5.

local level.⁵ Pieter Judson has stressed in his recent work how the Habsburg Empire collapsed in 1918 due to stress of war rather than the internal ethnic tensions as historians have emphasized for so long.⁶

The essays in this volume deal with cinematographic representations of World War I in the various succession states of the Habsburg Monarchy (plus Germany and the Soviet Union). The frequent regime changes in the region during the twentieth century figure front, line and center in film making. These essays reflect starkly how much the predominant ideologies of the various regimes affected artistic expression and World War I memory in these succession states. So, for example, Yugoslav Communists insisted that Slovene film makers continue with the perception of the Habsburg Monarchy as “prison of the peoples”, despite their quasi-“incarceration” by Tito’s Communist regime in Yugoslavia; film makers in Fascist Italy in the 1930s were not allowed to paint an image of Austria as an “enemy” during World War I due to Mussolini’s alliance with the authoritarian Dollfuss regime at the time.

These essays on the representation of World War I in the film-making of the various succession states provide a very useful comparative perspective of how artists (writers and film makers) responded to this “crisis of civilization” that was World War I. For one, many World War I films produced in these countries have

5 Claire Morelon, “Introduction,” in: Paul Miller/Claire Morelon, eds., *“As If There Had Been No Revolution At All”: Continuity and Rupture With the Habsburg Empire, 1914 to Today* [forthcoming].

6 Pieter Judson, “Where our commonality is necessary...’: Rethinking the end of the Habsburg Monarchy,” *Austrian History Yearbook* 48 (2017): 1-21; this text is based on his “Kann Lecture” at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities.

been lost. It is striking that “escapist” melodramas most often seem to have been the likely vehicle for film makers (based on novels) to address the turmoil and trauma of the war and thus shape the postwar memory. Rarely did films deal with the actual military history of the war (battles, larger strategic issues), or the war crimes committed by the belligerents, but with the human drama encountered by civilians in the hinterland. Most of the succession states produced documentaries too, if news clips were available in their national archives (that was not always the case as Habsburg censors may not have wanted to document the “national” existence of the Monarchy’s diverse constituent parts). Most of the succession states did not have the means to produce Hollywood style dramatic feature films *a la* “All Quiet on the Western Front.” Some “succession states” like post-Yugoslav Slovenia did not have any film industry at all in 1918; others like Czechoslovakia had well-developed native private film production companies -- nationalized under the Communist regime after World War II. In almost all of the countries under review here, World War II eclipsed World War I in importance and the film industry produced World War II movies after that war and often ignored World War I.

So the trajectories of film productions about World War I through the various post-World War I periods (Interwar, 1918-1938; World War II, 1938-1945; Cold War, 1945-1989/90; post-Cold War transition regimes, 1990 till today) are very different from country to country. Austria’s well established film industry had to build an identity for the new state that many considered “not viable” after the war. Sentimental films about the Habsburg family were designed to suppress the harsh realities and traumas of the war. The new Republic of Czechoslovakia stressed the role of the Czech Legion in World War I to build Czechoslovak national identity around the heroic role of the legionnaires. The foundation myth of the new Polish state was also build on the Polish

legionnaires who fought the invading Red Army in 1920/21. In a similar fashion, Yugoslav cinema after World War II concentrated on the heroic role of the partisan resistance against the Nazis in the Balkans.

In some of the countries under review in this volume, the 100th anniversary of World War I in 2014 produced a new wave of films and documentaries on the war. In the case of Slovenia, national television produced the first 5-part documentary series on World War I in the Slovenian region. The Isonzo battles (esp. Kobarid/Caporetto) and the end of the war were at the center of these documentaries, but one segment also dealt with the Eastern front in Galicia, where Slovenes fought in great numbers in 1914/15. In Austria, too, many new films on World War I were produced and shown in 2014 – here too, the state television network ORF played a crucial role.

This volume stands at the beginning of writing the history of World War I films in the succession countries of the Habsburg Monarchy. The rate of production may have varied in various succession states, but the scholarly interest may likely be stirred with this volume.

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