Wars and Between: Big Powers in Middle Europe 1918-1945

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Introduction

It is often said that rewriting history enables us to reimagine our future. Every new generation of historians have new things to say and we should prick up our ears to points they are making. As unknown archival evidence surfaces and new research trends set in, even our most widely accepted assumptions are tested anew. Our volume too, as the play on words in its title suggests, revisits well-studied issues in light of new evidence. It proposes the notion of Middle Europe's in-betweenness; that is, both between two world wars but also between Big Powers. Before revisiting the issues around European symbolic geography as well as chronological boundaries, we first focus on the Big Powers and their influence following the dissolution of the four continental Empires that had created Middle Europe; an area deemed unstable throughout its short-lived existence and transformed into the "bloodlands of Europe" once again engulfed by war.

The ten contributors, with two of us as editors, seek to build upon growing awareness and criticism of Big Powers' role in history and to question both long, as well as recently established narratives about the interwar period and the Middle European space. A recent wave of historiography of the European continental Empires that collapsed during the Great War has reappraised their complex history and longevity but inevitably contrasted it with violence and the instability of nation states that replaced them in the interwar period.[1] In their final stages, nationalizing Empires, as one title aptly put it, affected both titular nations and— whether as part of a backlash or not—numerous non-titular, smaller nationalities in the center of Europe.[2] New consensus emerged about the transformative experience of the war as the factor contributing most to the push for national independence as well as a culture of violence manifesting in the excesses of nationalism in the interwar period. Indeed, the collapse and partition of Empires due to their war-time defeat, not only gave legitimation to new states but radicalized their expectations and sharpened their polarization, as in the case of Yugoslavia and Romania, which contained some parts that were formerly independent and others that belonged to the Habsburg, Ottoman and Romanov Empires. Especially traumatic was the experience of the countries that lost the war, and were severely

[1] Jörn Leonhard, and Ulrike von Hirschhausen, *Empires und Nationalstaaten im 19. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009); Jörn Leonhard, and Ulrike von Hirschhausen, eds., *Comparing Empires* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012); Pieter Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[2] Stefan Berger and Alexei Miller, eds., *Nationalizing Empires* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2014).

punished for it – particularly Germany, Austria, Hungary and Bulgaria. Clearly, the failure of the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 in removing conflicts among major and minor powers in Middle Europe unleashed a chain of tumultuous events that would dominate the decades to follow. Yet the narratives of interwar instability in Middle Europe with the emphasis on the impact of the Great War and Paris Peace Treaties tend to downplay the historical dynamic of the interwar period itself. As an alternative, our authors re-open a whole set of questions tackled by previous generations of historians as well as delving into those overlooked until now. They focus on the continued involvement of Big Powers, problematizing their positions during the peace negotiation, demonstrating how they eventually and crucially damaged the fragile post-Versailles security.

Soon after it was concluded, the peace deal from Paris became better known for its failures than its revolutionary character. Scholars continue to search for explanations as to why this principle-based attempt at creating a new international order failed; resulting in an ongoing avalanche of literature on the topic. While there is a considerable disagreement on the subject, often even the very titles of published studies betray the widespread conviction that the proceedings in Paris decisively shaped the future of the world for many decades to come.[3] In Paris, for the first time, four democratically elected leaders, Clemenceau, Lloyd George, Orlando and Wilson, were tasked with negotiating a deal they would then have to justify to those who had elected them. In addition, citizens' pressure groups, from the suffragettes to pacifists and trade unions, attempted to influence the outcome, including the nature of the League of Nations. The greatest novelty was the presence of the American President, Woodrow Wilson, who led the United States into the Great War in Europe in its final stages in the belief that the war had "its roots in the disregard of rights of small nations and of nationalities which lacked the union and the force to make good their claim to

[3] Patrick O. Cohrs, *The Unfinished Peace after World War I: America, Britain and the Stabilisation of Europe, 1919–1932* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Alan Sharp's, *The Versailles settlement: Peacemaking after the First World War, 1919–1923* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) and *Consequences of Peace: The Versailles Settlement - Aftermath and Legacy* (London: Haus, 2011)*;* Margaret Macmillan's *Peacemakers: The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War* (London: John Murray, 2001) and *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2007); Conan Fisher, and Alan Sharp, eds., *After the Versailles Treaty: Enforcement, Compliance, Contested Identities* (London: Routledge, 2008); David A. Andelman*, A Shattered Peace: Versailles 1919 and the Price We Pay Today* (New York-London: J. Wiley, 2008).

determine their own allegiances and their own forms of political life."[4] Ever since, Wilson has personified a new international order principle, later defined as self-determination, of which he said "No nation should seek to extend its polity over any other nation or people, but … every people should be left free to determine its own polity, its own way of development, unhindered, unthreatened, unafraid, the little along with the great and powerful."[5]

Wilsonian pacifism and idealism gained popularity across both defeated and victorious states and hope for a new cooperative international order was particularly strong in the war-torn countries of landlocked Europe. One month before the armistice was signed with Germany, British diplomat Leo S. Amery warned his superiors that "when it comes to the Peace Conference, we shall have to face the Middle-European situation in a constructive, and not merely in an anti-German spirit. Otherwise we shall simply turn Central Europe into a new Balkans."[6] Yet the Paris conference, opened three months later, remained very hierarchical and top-down. Despite internationalist/universalist language and an initial presence of thirty-two state delegations, most decisions were eventually made by the leaders of Britain, France and Italy, but mainly the former two. As a result, other Big Powers, be they victorious as US, Japan and to some extent Italy or marginalized as Germany and Russia could hardly accept the Versailles outcome in full. The Big Three, Clemenceau, Lloyd George and Orlando, faced numerous and overwhelming challenges, from the impossibility of neatly separating the ethnic groups of Middle Europe, to the US' principled position aimed at setting the rules of the global, or at least the transatlantic, order. The peace deal eventually became notorious for its compromises; overriding the self-determination principle with security issues; double standards in the application of principles often based on racial/civilizational discourse; judging aptitudes of new states on social Darwinist categories; and a newly devised framework for the League of Nations which was far from integrative and inclusive. The divisive hierarchical peace put the defeated on probation and set their war indemnities in such a way as to justify the victors' war efforts and legitimize them in the eyes of their domestic public. Very soon it emerged that the new international order was based on rules

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[4] Woodrow Wilson, "'Only One Peace Possible': Address to Congress Answering a Peace Offensive," February 11, 1918, in *Americanism: Woodrow Wilson's Speeches on the War*, ed. Oliver Marble Gale (Chicago: The Baldwin Syndicate, 1918), 106.
[5] Woodrow Wilson, "'A Peace Worth Preserving': Address to Congress on Essential Terms of Peace," January 22, 1917, in Gale, *Americanism*, 27.
[6] Miklós Lojko, ed., *British Policy on Hungary, 1918–1919: A Documentary Source Book* (London: SSEES, 1995), 12.

which were stretched, ignored or abused. Certainly, the agreed-upon rules and standards were never applied to the colonies or with existing Empires, further undermining the basic value and principles of the new order. The most striking and disastrous disregard for basic human rights were displayed by Wilson himself when he refused to endorse a Japanese amendment to the Covenant of the League of Nations which called not for an immediate realization, but for an international recognition of the principle of the right to racial equality.[7] The issue of racial inequality was raised by number of NGOs who found a voice in Japan, who was among the victors of WWI and the first nonwhite country ever to participate in such a historic international conference. In addition to Wilson, the Japanese delegates' efforts supported by the Chinese were thwarted by British foreign secretary and prime ministers of Australia and New Zealand in expressions of blatant racism. Despite the overwhelming majority the motion received Wilson defiantly removed the issue from the agenda causing violent riots that spread out from US own capital to many other places in the world especially among those who saw their wartime service disrespected and promises broken.

All the above has led to the development of a common trope; that the paternalism, ignorance, and self-serving approach of Big Powers in conceiving the Paris Peace Treaties had disastrous consequences that were not only predicted at the time but have been the hallmarks of the policies of the world's powerful nations since time immemorial. Nevertheless, the global and generalized context of such an evaluation of the Versailles Treaties necessitates closer examination of particular cases to properly assess its alleged consequences. Therefore, in our volume we investigate the concrete historical dynamics and actions of Big Powers in the area where the Treaties most notoriously failed and soon engulfed the world in yet another and even more tragic war, of which the Holocaust looms most ominous. We are reluctant to dismiss the Versailles treaties as an outright failure. Throughout Europe, minority protection fell victim to sovereignty. Yet to claim that the creation of nation states further worsened the position of minorities is overly simplistic. Take the example of the arrangements of the Treaties of Saint-Germain in 1919 and of Trianon in 1920, which allowed the former citizens of the Habsburg Empire to opt to move to the successor state of their nationality with their properties compensated for. Even though this was never smoothly implemented, the same right was never offered some 75 years later following the

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[7] Paul Gordon Lauren, *The Evolution of International Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011, Third Edition), pp. 102-108.

dissolution of Yugoslavia. Similarly, to deal with an enormous humanitarian crisis with millions of stateless people as a result of war and the collapse of Empires, the first Nansen passports were issued to refugees from Russia already in July 1922. In the next twenty years, almost half million people fleeing from Russian and Ottoman Empire were provided with travel documents which were honored by 52 countries, where the refugees travelled and eventually settled. The subsequent humanitarian and refugee crises up to the most recent, do not fare better in comparison.

In addition to a continuous re-examination of the post-war peace settlement, there has been a growing scholarly understanding that the Great War did not finish in 1918 or with the Paris Peace Conference, best exemplified by Robert Gerwarth's recent *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917-1923*.[8] In this groundbreaking account of the immediate post-war years—when civil wars overlapped with revolutions, counter-revolutions and border conflicts between emerging states across the territories of four fallen land empires—Gerwarth rightly stresses that the violence was perpetrated by civilians and paramilitaries, and driven by a murderous sense of injustice projected onto enemies real and imaginary. Gerwarth describes the First World War as "the unintentional enabler of the social or national revolutions that were to shape Europe's political, social and cultural agenda for decades to come."[9] Furthermore, he argues that this new logic of violence was often directed at racial and religious minorities with no distinction between civilians and combatants. This, in turn, had portentous consequences two decades later, with the violent actors of 1917–1923 compared to those who unleashed a new cycle of violence in the 1930s and early 1940s, leading Gerwarth to claim that the story of Europe in the years between 1917 and 1923 is crucial for understanding the cycles of violence that characterized the continent's entire 20th century. Indeed, in the ruins of European empires, extreme ideologies such as fascism would take shape and ultimately emerge triumphant in Italy, Germany, and elsewhere. That ideological interference played a role in rivalry between powers is undeniable in the case of the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. However, our volume shows that the connection between ideology and diplomatic practices was much more complex and uneven than commonly believed. Furthermore, nationalism with its intrinsic warmongering, rather than fascism or communism, was

[8] Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917-1923* (London: Allen books, 2016).
[9] Gerwarth, *The Vanquished,* 12.

undoubtedly the ideological force behind much violence and disorder of the period.[10] The case studies in this volume, eschew a deterministic approach, with each case study examining considerable and significant local specificities that challenge overarching logic. Common to the studies grouped in our volume is the fact that for the prolonged period of time between the two wars, the Big Powers shaped the destinies of the small nascent states by either failing to prevent, or actively contributing to, the escalation of much of their inner or mutual conflicts. The violence might have subsided after 1923, but instability endured; and not only because the area was predestined for violence or sentenced to it at Versailles, but because powerful external and internal factors and agents stirred it. To put it simply, while Middle Europe was indeed burning, especially in the immediate aftermath of the War, Big Powers were pouring oil on fire (although, as two case studies by Alessandro Sette and Sergey Ledenev in our volume show, the motivation for this was often related to securing non-metaphorical oil).

Our focus on Big Powers meddling however is only a modest attempt towards a more nuanced narrative and explanation for the tragedy of Middle Europe in between and during the world wars. While the relationship between Big Powers and newly created nation states was undoubtedly hierarchical, several studies in our volume reveal how the latter manipulated big power disagreements, highlighting the limits of their strategy and leverage on the ground. This is most obvious in the economic sphere, which is also the least considered in studies dealing with the policies of the Big Powers. But it is not only ideology, the economic interests or the behind-the-scenes dealings that complicate the picture of the interference of the Big Powers and ensuing instability in Middle Europe. The full story is only illustrated when combined with an analysis of the Peace treaties, nationalist expectations and delusions of the Middle European regimes and other even more neglected issues including mass post-war/ post-imperial mobility, the introduction of suffrage, mass politics, new institutions, free speech and media, and other aspects generally associated with culture which all had bearing on the volatility and violence in the countries of the former Imperial autocracies.

As to the definition and designation of the space as Middle Europe for the period 1918-1945, we aim simply to disengage with the unsuccessful project of identity building made obsolete by events after 1989, that the term Central Europe is most commonly associated with. Tymothy D. Snyder's

[10] Jörn Leonhard, *Bellizismus und Nation: Kriegsdeutung und Nationbestimmung in Europa und den Vereinigten Staaten* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2008).

recent *Bloodlands,* has changed the way historians are thinking about 20th century history and our area of interest in particular.[11] While Snyder's primary aim and greatest achievement was to demonstrate the deadly human cost of totalitarian utopianism, his geographical delineation is equally as trailblazing and influential. Snyder proposed a new perspective on an area previously delineated by various symbolic geographies by situating it between Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union, the two great totalitarian powers. While clearly focusing on ideologically-driven terror, Snyder at the same time overturns the prevalent way of analyzing individual regimes and countries by highlighting the interplay and mutual influence of powerful players in the region, partially coinciding with the same dynamics we address in this volume. Our idea was similarly to re-illuminate a set of crises and conflicts that marked the 1920s and 1930s in Middle Europe by entangling them with the various forms of big power interventions—and responses to them—and to demonstrate how they affected the fragile post-Versailles security. Ten case studies offer the analyses of diplomatic, military, economic or cultural engagement of France, Germany, Soviet Union, Britain and Italy in the highly volatile region of what we are calling Middle Europe, redeploying the area's symbolic geography at the time and accentuating its position of in-betweenness or in the middle.

Middle Europe, as political and spatial construct, has been variably and not innocuously labelled as "Central," "East-Central" or "Eastern" Europe. The terms "Middle" or "Central" Europe (German *Mitteleuropa*, French *Europe centrale*) appeared nearly simultaneously in German and French geographic scholarship in the early ninetieth century. Initially, both traditions associated the terms with the territories from the Pyrenees to the Danube, which apparently, as the German authors argued, could be unified under German leadership. After the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, the French started to exclude France from this region; the Germans adopting this view later, by the end of WWI.[12] On the other hand, by the late 19th century, many French intellectuals believed (and hoped) that the Slavic nationalisms would counter Germanic aspirations in this region. The

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[11] Timothy D. Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

[12] In 1915, a German geographer Hermann Wagner argued that in the regional division of Europe only the place of France—whether as a part of Central or Western Europe—was not sure. The same year, Friedrich Naumann was predicting that France could still become a member of a future Mitteleurope-an union. See Hans-Dietrich Schultz and Wolfgang Natter, "Imagining Mitteleuropa: Conceptualisations of 'Its' Space in and Outside German Geography," *European Review of History—Revue européenne d'Histoire* 10, no. 2 (2003): 274, 285. For more on the idea of Mitteleuropa, see Henry Cord Meyer, *Mitteleuropa in German thought and action* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1955); Jacques Droz, *L'Europe Centrale* (Paris: Payot, 1960); Jacques Le Rider, *Mitteleuropa: Auf den Spuren eines Begriffes* (Vienna: Deuticke, 1994).

concept of “Middle Europe” became part of a political agenda in 1848 and in 1914–45; a heuristic geographic notion which, like all others, was proposed to denote clusters of transnational structures common to an imagined region and not necessarily congruent with its political or geographical boundaries. It was to become ever more contested following the dramatic changes it underwent in twentieth century. The influential book *Mitteleuropa* by the German liberal politician Friedrich Naumann, published in 1915, widely popularized the idea of bringing Central European states into a union, where Germany should have enjoyed a central status.[13] From 1918, the vision of Slavic (and thus, Eastern) predominance also became more apparent in the international understanding of the region and many political thinkers started to exclude Germany from the *“New Central Europe.”*[14] A Czech concept of Central Europe emerged, most notably in Tomáš G. Masaryk’s initiative of Mid-European Democratic Union of small nations between Germany and Russia, with an anti-German agenda.[15] While favored by the French, the Germans clearly perceived it as a threat to their vision of *Mitteleuropa* as their backyard and ticket to becoming the leading nation in Europe. After 1945, Germany was dismembered and most of the German-speaking communities outside of Germany and Austria disappeared (including millions of German-speaking Jews who were killed, and millions of expelled ethnic Germans). Soviet domination behind the Iron Curtain changed further its symbolic geography and the region became widely known including the English language scholarship as “Eastern Europe.” From the 1970s, other usages emerged to reflect various political and scholarly agendas, such as the division of the region among German scholars into *Ostmitteleuropa* (East Central Europe), *Südosteuropa* (Southeastern Europe), *Nordosteuropa* (Northeastern Europe). The late Cold War context also became the most fertile ground for the (re)emergence of the already mentioned notion of “Central Europe.” However since the end of the Cold War and following subsequent EU enlargement that has signaled the region’s clear delineation from Russia, the term has lost some of its appeal.[16]

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[13] The first edition is Friedrich Naumann, *Mitteleuropa* (Berlin: Reimer, 1915), translated to English by Christabel Margaret Meredith and published with an introduction by William James Ashley in London Westminster the following year by King and sons.
[14] Antoine Marès, “La vision française de l'Europe centrale du XIXe au XXe siècle,” *Cahiers du Centre de Recherches Historiques,* no. 7 (1991): 7–8; Isabelle Davion, “The Concept of Central Europe in French historiography in the 20th century,” *Historyka: Studia Metodologiczne*, no. 43 (2013): 21–33.
[15] For the detailed discussion of various notions see Peter Bugge, “The Use of the Middle: Mitteleuropa vs. Střední Evropa,” *European Review of History-Revue européenne d’Histoire* 6, no. 1 (1999): 15–35.
[16] See the special issue of *European Review of History—Revue européenne d’Histoire* 6, no. 1 (1999).

While we recognize that our notion of Middle Europe reflects the commonly used "Central Europe" or its associate "East-Central Europe," these terms generally exclude Germany and German influence, which is crucial to this study. Our case studies also include one on Albania, which is similarly not covered under the Central Europe label. Therefore, we opted for a literal translation of the German *Mitteleuropa* and attempted to avoid the limitation of the term *Central Europe*. Semantically, the word *Mittel* in German signifies centrality and was easily associated with virtue. In English on the other hand, the word Middle is more ambiguous. Middle Earth was the fictional setting of much of British writer J. R. R. Tolkien's fiction, or as he described it: "the abiding place of Men, the objectively real world, in use specifically opposed to imaginary worlds (as Fairyland) or unseen worlds (as Heaven or Hell)."[17]

In the period under scrutiny in our volume, the notion of Middle Europe is thus used to convey a vast continental, multi-ethnic area, considered a natural space of German expansion, but occupied by a conglomerate of weak states that faced unequal and aggressive treatment from surrounding Big Powers.[18] More precisely, Middle Europe refers to the defeated and new (or enlarged) states created after the Great War, whose frontiers and regimes were fostered under the direct or covert intervention of the Big Powers, most notably the Paris Peace Treaties, where the Big Four imposed a set of restrictions on armament, financial obligations; special minority statuses; and, at the same time, secured for themselves trade privileges. Following the collapse of the European continental empires, newly-formed states were in dire need of foreign assistance whereas their human, natural, economic, transport and other resources needed foreign investment and management due to massive destruction and dislocation. Their economic exploitation by foreign powers, be it in the management of raw materials extraction, foodstuff production or use of cheap labor—while providing loans and markets—was a "precondition," as György Ránki argued, for the modernization of this indebted region in the era between two world wars.[19] It was underlined by the shared perception that weak, but resource-rich Middle European countries, if improperly governed, would represent a deadly danger to European and global security. Indeed, throughout the period local actors engaged in numerous internal and external conflicts, based on their strategic,

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[17] Humphrey Carpenter, ed., *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), 183.
[18] Tony Judt also argued that "an area of Europe called central was parasitic on the problem of German unification." Tony Judt, "Rediscovery of Central Europe," *Daedalus* 119, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 24.
[19] György Ránki, "The Great Powers and the Economic Reorganization of the Danube Valley after World War I," *Acta Historica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 27, nos. 1–2 (1981): 63–97.

economic or “national” aspirations. The latter was of particular importance: Middle European states either included numerous “minorities” within their newly given borders or strove to “protect” their ethnic “brethren” beyond their borders. The German-speakers were the most numerous and widespread minority throughout the region, but the Albanians (with 40%) and the Magyars (30%) had the highest percentage of fellow nationals beyond nation state borders. Several papers gathered in this book demonstrate how Big Powers influenced regional affairs by instrumentalizing ethnic conflicts and national movements, while at the same time creating economic and military dependencies and strengthening their prestige through cultural penetration and clientele building.

Besides its geographic scope, our volume also adopts a different chronology that recalls the notion of the *Second Thirty Years War* as pondered long ago by Charles De Gaulle and Winston Churchill to describe a protracted conflict over the problem of Germany’s bid for domination in (the center of) Europe. Often rejected as essentializing, the syntagma was also criticized for implying that the two wars were similarly “total” whereas only the Second World War was so closely intertwined with genocide.[20] Doubts were also raised over its heuristic quality in comparison to the “original” *Thirty Years War* and its unrivalled impact on collective memory and identity. Nevertheless, the syntagma is commonly used. For Heinrich August Winkler, at its core is the German break with the West.[21] For Enzo Traverso it was the period when interstate conflict morphed into a global civil war, when rules of engagement were abandoned and what used to be legitimate adversaries fought as irreducible enemies for the annihilation of their opponents.[22] Robert Gildea and Robert Gerwarth insist that in this period, war was also the key defining form of crossing borders and cultures in Europe; creating the space for international contacts and transfers of ideas and people.[23] By placing our chronological contours between the ends of two wars and accepting both wars and

[20] Jörg Echternkamp, “1914–1945: A Second Thirty Years War? Advantages and Disadvantages of an Interpretive Category,” in *Imperial Germany Revisited: Continuing Debates and New Perspectives*, ed. Sven Oliver Müler and Cornelius Torp (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 189–200.

[21] Heinrich August Winkler, *The Age of Catastrophe: A History of the West*, 1914-1945, trans. Stewart Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), originally published as *Geschichte des Westens: Die Zeit der Weltkriege. 1914-1945* (München: C.H. Beck Verlag, 2011).

[22] Enzo Traverso, *Fire and Blood: The European Civil War, 1914–1945* (New York: Verso, 2016). In original *À Feu et à sang: De la guerre civile européenne, 1914–1945* (Paris: Stock, 2007).

[23] Robert Gerwarth and Robert Gildea, “Resistance and Collaboration in the Second World War Transnational Phenomenon. Introduction,” *Journal of Modern European History* 16, no. 2 (2018): 175–182.

German centrality as its defining features, we go beyond the catchy formula that the Second Thirty Years War sometimes emanates. Looking at the entirety of the period, especially the interwar, our volume accentuates the continuous attempts of all the Big Powers to secure their interests in Middle Europe by diplomatic, economic, cultural and, as a last resort, by military means. Thereby, Big Powers engaged in a competition which underwent two principal stages. The first could be defined as Franco-British (the 1920s–beginning of the 1930s), as established by the Little Entente and Poland alliances, and the second as German-Italian, coinciding with their resurgence (mid-the 1930s–1943/44). By 1941, the region's remaining "independent" states (Hungary, Romania, Slovakia) submitted to the leading role of the Tripartite Pact of Germany, Italy and Japan. Following the military defeats of France (1940), Italy (1943) and Germany (1945), it was the USSR and the USA (to a much lesser extent) which seized the preponderant influence in most of Middle Europe. As the contribution of Iskander E. Magadeev in our volume demonstrates, the Soviet manipulation of local border disputes played sometimes a crucial role in establishing the Communist-led regimes in the region. During the period of Soviet domination— which froze small regional conflicts and marshalled a relative stability—, the concept of Middle Europe, as a territory with particular characteristics, disappeared together with the competition over its mastery among multiple Big Powers.

Finally, let us explain the use of the adjective "big" instead of the widespread "great" to denote major powers in this Introduction. While there is a semantic difference between the two terms—according to which "great" is associated with major significance, accomplishment or acclaim—our reasons not to use it is related less to style and more to the terminology of particular historical context. As there are no set or defined characteristics of a "great power," a formal or informal acknowledgment of a nation's great power status is most often used. During the Paris Peace Conference, the "Big Four"—France, Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States—held markedly more power and influence on the proceedings of the treaties. Following Italy's withdrawal in protest of its demands having not been met, the other three countries have been referred to in the historiography as the "Big Three." More importantly, we use it because at the time there was a clear dichotomy between big and small countries as stressed by the American apostle of Internationalism, Stephan Duggan, who argued that the chief challenge for the post-Great War Middle Europe would be to resolve its 'Small Nations' fragility', which played the role of 'an invitation to aggression' for the 'Big Nations.' As long as this intervention of 'Big

Nations' continues, Middle Europe, claimed Duggan, would remain 'the danger zone of Europe.'[24]

Our authors, however, were free to choose their own terminology along their topics. Italy, often deemed "the least of the Great Powers," continued to exert significant influence in Middle Europe, as three studies in our volume detail. The maybe unusual emphasis on Italy reflects in part an effort to remedy the underrepresentation of Italy in the existing scholarship on the interwar politics, culture and economy of Middle Europe. Moreover, Italy underwent a transition from a "liberal" model of foreign policy to an ideological driven concept of big or "great" power under Mussolini's leadership, though as our studies demonstrate, this transition was not as clear-cut as previously emphasized in the historiography.

Before introducing the papers in our volume let us further elaborate on the power interplay within the period and space defined above. After their victory in the Great War, three principal victorious states—France, Britain and Italy—proceeded to supervise the new states of Central and eastern corners of Europe, advocating peace and protection. As a British diplomat suggested to his Minister in late 1919, "we must for a time interfere boldly in the internal affairs of these states…and make all these people understand that they have to live together as neighbors whether they like it or nor."[25] However, this pattern of hierarchical power relationship turned out to be designed not for the benefits of local societies; but for the maintenance of the European and global order imposed by the winning powers, most evident in policy deciding the future of Austria or Czechoslovakia—as the articles by Dragan Bakić and Anne-Sophie Nardelli-Malgrand in our collection demonstrate. Given its military capabilities and strong strategic interests in Middle Europe, it was no accident that France became a dominant player in the region. The unprecedented level of French interest in the region was a consequence of the rupture of its anti-German alliance with Romanovs' Russia in 1917–18 and the following international isolation of the Soviet regime. Primarily the French policy was directed primarily at Germany and its eastern neighbors—Poland and Czechoslovakia. These two new republics largely benefited from the French support in the

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[24] Stephan P. Duggan, "Reconstruction among Small Nations of Middle Europe," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* Vol. 84 (Jul., 1919): 64–69.

[25] British Minister to Vienna Sir Francis Lindley to Curzon, 7 November 1919. Cited in Gábor Bátonyi, *Britain and Central Europe, 1918–1933* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 5.

implementation of their territorial goals after the Great War and, as Fréderic Dessberg and Sergey Ledenev demonstrate in our volume, Paris was ready to sacrifice the self-determination principle in their favor. At the same time, the French counted on British support in the face of the German aggression, though Britain remained wary of French hegemonic aspirations. The plan to cut the Hohenzollern Reich into separate pieces never materialized, prompting the French to try to reduce the German danger by involving the smaller Middle European countries in its security planning. The French conceived two strategies to safeguard their hegemony: first, to build a regional system of alliances checking Germany from the East and second, to appease Berlin by offering it the possibility to expand its influence in Middle Europe. While both options were applied throughout the 1920s and the 1930s, neither was effective enough, as the first paper of this volume by Gusztáv Kecskés clearly shows.

France almost continuously backed the Little Entente, a system of pro-Versailles alliances in Middle Europe, but its members had different security priorities and were often mutually antagonized. As the mutual liabilities stemming from the treaties with Warsaw (1921), Prague (1924), Bucharest (1926) and Belgrade (1927) were far from obvious, the French military and political circles had serious doubts concerning the usefulness of any engagement in the region. Instead, from the mid-1930s, Paris turned to encouraging Italy and the Soviet Union to play an active and stabilizing role in Middle Europe. By 1934, the former was allowed to create its own bloc with Austria and Hungary (so called "Rome Protocols"), while the latter was invited to a broad security initiative called "the Eastern Locarno," aimed at uniting the Little Entente, Poland and the Soviet Union in a common front against Germany. At the same time, given the weakness of its Middle-European alliances, France worked on a direct understanding with Germany. This was evident from the Locarno meeting of 1925, where Paris and Berlin mutually promised not to attack each other, prompting Berlin to direct its post-Versailles dissatisfaction toward Middle Europe. In the late 1930s, Paris renewed its appeasement policy towards Germany, allowing Hitler to subjugate Austria in March 1938 and Czechoslovakia in October 1938–March 1939. When in September 1939, the *Wehrmacht* attacked Poland, Paris—together with London—finally declared war on Germany. Nevertheless, France abstained from engaging in serous combat against the Hitler regime until it invaded its own soil in May 1940. The following French military disaster and the armistice of June 1940 marked the end of any French interwar grandeur as well as its strategic predominance in Middle Europe.

Unlike Paris, both London and Rome were more concerned with the Balkans; London wished to protect its Mediterranean communication routes, whereas Rome saw this region as its most natural expansionist outlet. All three powers were able nevertheless to cooperate in preventing the re-emergence of Germany on economic and military terms as a threat until the mid-1930s. Britain was also interested in the Eastern confines of Middle Europe, regarded as a zone of containment of Communism, whose ideology of self-determination and anti-imperialism threatened the British colonial power. To further its aims, Britain pursued a reconciliatory and federalist policy. From the mid-1920s, London encouraged the conclusion of a "Central-European" or Balkan Locarno, but without its direct participation. As Gabor Batonyi showed, London was constantly encouraging Austria, Hungary and Czechoslovakia to form a kind of political or economic union in order to pacify their animosities but mostly to reduce the chances of the Anschluss movement.[26] In the early 1930s, trying to minimize the economic consequences of the Great Depression, London even elaborated an ambitious plan for uniting all Danubian countries: Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. This and other similar initiatives never materialized but continued to occupy the British as reflected in various federation projects during WWII. Compared to the French, the British Foreign Office policy towards the region was rather distanced and aimed at balancing the conflicts between Middle European countries. In the background of the Little Entente cooperation, London often acted with Rome on behalf of defeated countries at Versailles, as during the 1933 Four Power Pact (London, Paris, Rome, Berlin) negotiations over Danzig; Hungary's frontier disputes with its Little Entente neighbors; and the fate of Albania, which antagonized Italy and Yugoslavia. The best-known example of revisionist compromise was in 1938, when Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain mediated the conflict over the fate of the Sudeten Germans between Berlin and Prague. The Munich Conference of September 29, 1938 resurrected the concept of the Big Four frame from 1933 speculated for long time, but the solution proposed—the revision of the Czechoslovak frontiers on an ethnic basis (in favor of Germany, Poland and Hungary) was short-lived. Berlin violated the agreement by annexing the Czech lands in March 1939 and by invading Poland in September, prompting Britain to declare war on Germany and renounce its appeasement strategy. Throughout the war however, the British kept alive their policy of regional alliances and confederations in order to keep Germany and the Soviet

[26] Ibid.

Union at bay. By the end of the war, British power—as with France—was replaced by that of the Americans and the Soviets.

The Soviets perceived Middle Europe differently from the British and the French, clearly delineating two zones: the Northern (Baltic) and the Southern (Balkan-Danube), with the former visibly prioritized.[27] This was the outcome of the fact that Western Belarus and Western Ukraine were joined to Poland; Bessarabia to Romania; and the Baltic states had become independent in the aftermath of the Great War. Accordingly, the British Foreign Office considered the borders between the USSR and Central Europe as one of most dangerous conflict zones in the world. Initially, the Bolsheviks vehemently opposed the Versailles settlement, but by the mid-1930s they turned into its supporters only to become its undertakers by 1939. While Berlin had originally established its political and economic dominance throughout Middle Europe excluding the Soviets, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939 signified the unprecedented division of Middle Europe into the spheres of influence of both powers. The arrangement did not last and in effect served only as prelude to the most destructive period for the region. Despite all interwar maneuvering, Soviet strategic aims in Middle Europe in the end corresponded with the territorial aims of the Russian Empire during WWI and its endeavor to challenge German power. The "Percentages" agreement of Stalin-Churchill in October 1944 only confirmed the established Soviet domination over these areas. This was acknowledged by Churchill six months later in his famous speech "Sinews of Peace," which described the Iron Curtain descending from the Baltic to the Adriatic.[28]

Italy, which we already introduced as "the last and the least of the Great Powers," was nevertheless extremely expansionist between two world wars. Its well-known objective was to make the Mediterranean or, at least, the Adriatic its "mare nostrum." When targeting North Africa, it encountered rival—but stronger—British and French interests. By contrast, its aspirations in the Balkans implied an active presence in Middle Europe, left in a power vacuum after 1918. While subjugating Albania seemed easy (as Alessandro Sette demonstrates in his paper, not only because its geographic position, but also its natural resources), the same could not have been said of neighboring Yugoslavia. As a consequence, Rome strove to encircle the South Slav Kingdom via its alliances with Austria, Hungary and Bulgaria (and eventually, Albania). From the late 1920s,

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[27] Oleg Ken, "Sovetskaya politika v dvukh izmereniyakh: strany Tsentral'no-Vostochnoy Yevropy v diplomatii i voyennoy strategii SSSR, 1925–1939 gg," *Communisme,* nos. 74–75 (2003): 45–70.

[28] Winston Churchill, "The Sinews of Peace" quoted in Mark A. Kishlansky, ed., *Sources of World History* (New York, Harper Collins, 1995), 298-302.

Mussolini did so by promoting their economic and financial reconstruction, the strengthening of their armies, and insisting on the principle of self-determination in their border disputes with Yugoslavia. The greatest difference between the Italian Liberal and Fascist policies in Middle Europe were was not in their aims, but their methods. As Stefano Santoro illustrates in his chapter, Il Duce made important efforts in extending the web of Italian cultural institutions abroad (like Institutes of Italian culture, CAUR or local branches of Dante Alighieri Society), refraining from speaking about nourishing links with the multiple local Fascist movements or secretly assisting paramilitary organizations, like the Macedonian *IMRO*, the Croat *Ustaše* or the Austrian *Heimwehr*.

Italian relations with Germany were rather unique: being in the Entente coalition during WWI, Italy postponed its declaration of war on Germany until 1918. Similarly, in the interwar years, Rome was "standing with Berlin on the Rhine, and with the French on the Danube". Mussolini applauded the French evacuation from the Rhine in 1925, while at the same time opposing the Anschluss.[29] However, as Anne-Sophie Nardelli-Malgrande shows in her contribution, that opposition was negotiable with Italy eventually abandoning the politico-economic bloc it formed with Austria and Hungary and accepting the Anschluss. Rome came to forge an alliance with the Nazis after 1936 but hesitated to alienate the French and the British until 1940, only to be the first of the German allies to abandon the sinking Hitler coalition three years later. This was also the end of Italian expansion into Albania, Dalmatia and Slovenia—which were directly annexed—and of its protectorates in Croatia (extended by Bosnia) and Montenegro.[30]

Finally, Germany, another imperialistic late-comer, is described as the most aggressive regarding its expansion in Middle Europe. Despite profound differences between the Wilhelmine and the Hitler regimes, ever since the 1960s historians point to the continuity of German imperial ambitions from 1914–45. German penetration into the region is associated with the importance of the German markets for local production, the wide dissemination of German-speaking communities who affected local politics from within and, last but not least, its foreign policy which was the loudest voice among the defeated countries on the international scene. The Versailles Peace Treaty annulled all German conquests and envisaged occupation of some of the Reich's

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[29] Liliana Saiu, *La politica estera italiana dall'Unità a oggi* (Roma: Laterza, 1999), 97.
[30] Aristotle Kallis, *Fascist Ideology: Territory and Expansionism in Italy and Germany, 1922-1945* (London: Routledge, 2000); MacGregor Knox, *Common Destiny: Dictatorship, Foreign Policy, and War in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

territories. Germany was additionally obliged to pay reparations and capabilities of its army were drastically reduced. Yet as David X. Noack argues in his paper, even in these conditions, Germany tried to retain its influence throughout the region, even in such remote areas as Slovakia's Eastern region of Košice. Both the Weimar and Nazi governments paid special attention to the German communities abroad as the natural channels of its influence in the region. However, until Nazi propaganda extended its grip of the region in the late 1930s, most local German-speakers seemed to show little interest in this pan-Germanism. Similarly, both Weimar and Nazi governments worked tirelessly to remove the Versailles limitations, particularly the French occupation of the Rhine Valley, reparations and the prohibition on conscription. Equally if not more important was recovering its political and economic influence in Middle Europe; linking its industrial and food production to Germany and demanding concessions for the *Wehrmacht* to cross into foreign territories or station there for a longer period.

While our collection brings out specific case studies of interaction, influence, and intervention between Big Powers and particular nation-states, by putting them together we emphasize that they cannot be fully understood from a nation-centric perspective. Instead they are intended to illustrate and nuance the general assertions made above, tapping into previously un-researched archival sources and relying to a great extent on often marginalized Eastern and Central European perspectives. As the first decade under examination here was marked by the Entente nations, the first studies of the collection mainly focus on France, Britain and Italy. As the remaining period was largely shaped by the dynamics of the Three Axis Powers, the second half of the book primarily targets the policies of Berlin, Rome and Tokyo. We paired our studies into five thematic clusters addressing the geopolitical balance in Middle Europe, frontier revisionism, economic penetration, stirring of ethnic feelings and cultural diplomacy.

The two papers in the first cluster illustrate how the two strongest victors at the end of the First World War in Europe—France and Great Britain—attempted to integrate Middle Europe into their diplomatic and geopolitical calculations. Even though historiography traditionally links both colonial empires closely, their perceptions of Germany and its alleged intention to rule Central Europe were in fact, different. The first paper here is penned by Gusztáv D. Kecskés, who evaluates the strategic, political, economic and cultural tools Paris used to expand its influence in the region and to keep the Weimar Republic out. Despite France being the only big power which established formal local alliances, Kecskés argues that during the first interwar decade French policy shifted

from limited military and political contacts to broad economic and cultural penetration. French banks and companies provided loans and investments for local industries, playing an important role in the region's economic life. Furthermore, France was the pioneer of cultural diplomacy among the powers, promoting Francophilia through education, mass media and networking. Nevertheless, Kecskés argues that France's weight in Middle Europe, clearly visible at the beginning of the 1920s, significantly dwindled after the conclusion of the Locarno Treaty in 1925. Countermeasures taken by Paris to prevent this process were unsuccessful due to the insufficiency of French military and economic power and the competition of other powers. Thus, Kecskés traces the decline of French influence in Middle Europe to much earlier than the Munich Conference of 1938.

In the second piece in this cluster, building on his research on British diplomacy in the Danubian countries in 1918–36, Dragan Bakić offers an insider analysis of British foreign policy regarding Germany in the key period leading up to the Second World War, familiarly known as appeasement.[31] Here we see policy makers at work and at failure: an imperial power detached from the region with true interests elsewhere, trying to obtain as much as possible while investing next to nothing. While the Foreign Office had no illusion as to the ultimate predatory motives of Hitler's policy, they strove to counter it by preserving Austrian independence and soothing a potential crisis over the Sudeten Germans in Czechoslovakia. Both proved futile. Bakić lists a number of constraining factors which shaping Foreign Office policy: British public opinion, the inadequacy of armament and defensive arrangements, the lack of co-operation from other departments and a general perception of Central European affairs as not being of direct interest to Great Britain. Some British analysts argued that no effort should be spared in order to meet the German menace in Austria and further down the Danube, convinced that only a general European settlement, and not a narrower Western European one, would protect British security in the long run. Yet others considered German hegemony in Middle Europe inevitable and advised a policy of aloofness. The former opinion had the upper hand until the end of 1937, but without leverage. Bakić shows how easily Foreign Office opposition to the government's passive stance toward the German challenge was subdued, clearing the road for Neville Chamberlain's appeasement policy. This colossal error

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[31] Dragan Bakić, *Britain and Interwar Danubian Europe. Foreign Policy and Security Challenges, 1919–1936* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

would cost many countries in Middle Europe dearly; along with Britain, which also soon found itself isolated under German attack.

The second cluster entitled "Bordering" traces how the Big Powers instrumentalized the territorial disputes in Middle Europe in order to increase their leverage on local actors. Our book's chronology is punctuated by the border-crafting summits of Paris in 1919 and Potsdam in 1945, but Middle Europe experienced many other interferences, including the decision of the Conference of Allied Ambassadors at Paris in the 1920s, the infamous Munich meeting of 1938 as well as two Vienna Awards of 1938 and 1940. Territorial revision, especially in times of crisis or war, was frequently used as a tool by the Big Powers' to turn Middle European states into allies and here we examine two prominent cases. Frédéric Dessberg investigates French policies on Poland immediately after the Great War, while the Versailles architecture was still debated, and Polish borders were gradually taking shape. Poland's frontiers were the cause of most conflicts in Middle Europe, with German-Polish territorial conflicts smoldering throughout the interwar period and other Big Powers' interests waning. Dessberg illuminates the crucial role played by the French in establishing an independent Poland in 1918. Paris supported the new state on the international scene and sent its military mission to Warsaw to boost the force of the Polish army. Furthermore, Dessberg uncovers debates in Paris concerning the Polish border and how the French leaders sought to reconcile the self-determination principle with their strategic objectives. Paris agreed to support Polish territorial ambitions in the provinces of Posen, Upper Silesia (that supplied Poland and other Central-European regions with coal—the main industrial energy source of that time) and the city of Danzig, inasmuch as these ambitions were anti-German. However, the French had also to consider the viewpoints of their British and American Allies, who were checking its hegemonic ambitions. Dessberg helps us to contextualize the French diplomatic struggle with the help of a case study of the Vilnius region, contested by both the Poles and the Lithuanians.

From the border disputes of the beginning of our period we move to its very end to draw parallels—though the actors and borders were different. In his chapter, Iskander E. Magadeev uncovers the diplomatic game played by the USSR with two Nazi allies, Romania and Hungary, in the context of their mutual dispute over Transylvania. As one of the most ethnically mixed regions in Middle Europe, control over Transylvania changed three times in the short period covered by our volume, and Magadeev's contribution illuminates how the Budapest-Bucharest quarrel ended. The stage for Soviet involvement was set by the provisions of the German-Italian

Second Vienna Award of 30 August 1940, which divided Transylvania between Hungary and Romania, and deeply dissatisfied Moscow in what they increasingly saw as their courtyard, given its proximity to the Soviet borders. During the following years, both Hungary and Romania hoped that the division of Transylvania could be revised in their favor with the help of new big power interference, and this hope greatly affected their foreign policy. First, it pushed both states to join the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 and then, by 1944–45, to join the Allies against Germany. As Magadeev points out, already in June 1941, the Soviets proposed to re-discuss the Transylvanian question in order to keep Hungary out of war. As this overture failed and Budapest declared war on the USSR, the Soviets continued to exploit the Transylvanian conflict in order to turn Hungary and Romania against each other and against Germany. The paper illustrates the changing mechanism of the war aims in Moscow, which balanced its position on the Transylvanian question with the Soviet interests in Hungary and Romania, the developments on the Eastern front and the dynamics among the Allies. As the war progressed, the USSR was increasingly taking the Romanian side in order to help it overcome the loss of Bessarabia (Moldavia) to the USSR as well as to affect its internal politics and draw it closer into its orbit. Magadeev details three main scenarios: keeping the Vienna Award untouched; returning Northern Transylvania to Romania and, even, the creation of an independent Transylvania. In comparison with a reluctant Hungary, the chances of Romania gaining back Transylvania multiplied after its capitulation in September 1944 and the establishment of the Communist-dominated cabinet in March 1945. By then Moscow could officially support the restitution of Transylvanian lands to Bucharest, allowing Romanians to administer Northern Transylvania and press the Western allies, who were more inclined to leave some disputed lands to Hungary, to agree to the complete return of Transylvania into Romania at the Paris Peace Conference of 1946.

The third cluster, metaphorically entitled "Putting out fire with gasoline," presents two illustrations of the fierce rivalries among Big Powers for Middle Europe's raw materials and turns our attention to the growing literature on "economic nationalism" as a key-feature of the Second Thirty Years War period. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Middle Europe transformed into a semi-colonial source of raw materials (principally non-ferrous metals, foodstuffs and hydrocarbons) for the Western Powers prompting some historians to argue that the principal cause

of WWII in Europe lay in great power competition over economic control of the region.[32] The papers in the third cluster deal with one specific aspect of this competition, caused by the global energy shift between two world wars, which saw the steady replacement of coal by oil as the chief machine fuel. Consequently, acquiring oil abroad became the fundamental goal of Western European powers, whose domestic oil productions remained inadequate (e.g., by 1918, 95 percent of French petroleum fuel was imported). The proximity and alleged petroleum riches of Middle Europe attracted much attention.[33] Some sources like Eastern Galicia and Romania were already established, others, like in Albania or Hungary, were explored. However, the information about their deposits was scarce and often misleading. Eastern Galicia was the third largest oil producer in the world before the Great War, but its oil deposits were depleted in the early interwar. Albanian deposits were similarly overestimated.[34] Eventually, the oil deficit of Europe limited its military might and partly caused its later subordination to the USSR and the USA—with their large deposits and oil production capacities.

The first piece in this section, by Sergey Ledenev, draws an interesting parallel/contrast with Dessberg's study of the French position on the German-Polish border. Illuminating how Paris supported Warsaw in acquiring Eastern Galicia in 1919–23—with its numerous Ukrainian populations—, Ledenev exposes the underlying economic (or rather, oil related) reasons behind the region's ultimate incorporation into the Polish territory. The paper also establishes connections between official French viewpoints and informal government attitudes, influenced by private lobbyists from the petroleum industry. The first part of the article examines French involvement in armed conflicts in Galicia between 1918-1921 and the second part presents the French position in the international competition for Galician oil from 1921 to 1923. With the French military and diplomatic support, Eastern Galicia was first occupied by the Polish army, and then, by 1923, internationally recognized as a Polish province.

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[32] Paul N. Hehn, *A Low Dishonest Decade. The Great Powers, Eastern Europe, and the Economic Origins of World War II, 1930-1941* (New York: Continuum, 2002); David E. Kaiser, *Economic Diplomacy and the Origins of the Second World War: Germany, Britain, France, and Eastern Europe, 1930-1939* (Princeton University Press, 1981).

[33] Roberto Nayberg, "La politique française du pétrole à l'issue de la première guerre mondiale: perspectives et solutions," *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporaines* 4 (2006): 117.

[34] In mid-the 1920s, a director of Anglo-Persian Oil Company believed that the investments in Albania should be more beneficial than in Saudi Arabia. See Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The epic quest for oil, money and power* (New York: Free press, 2008), 264.

Unlike in Eastern Galicia, where French oil interests went unchallenged, the petroleum industry in Romania or Albania became the objects of intense imperialist competition. Alessandro Sette analyses in detail the Italian-British competition for Albanian petroleum in the first half of the 1920s. Originally, Albanian territory was important for Rome only as an Adriatic watchtower and, at the same time, a bridge to the Balkans. Later, just as Austria-Hungary (the main Italian rival in the Western Balkans) was defeated in 1918, came the discovery of oil fields in Albania that immediately became the most important targets of Italian foreign policy in the region. However, Italy had to face its former and significantly more powerful ally—Britain—which eventually got the upper hand. The promise of vast amounts of oil however proved to be inaccurate, and the British ultimately had to decrease their presence in Albania, with Italians remaining the sole masters of Albania, which they eventually annexed in 1939.

The next cluster, "Self-determination?", looks at how Big Powers exploited or attempted to exploit national issues or nationalist movements. The self-determination principle, proclaimed by Wilson and Lenin in 1918, was hailed in Versailles but never fully applied. It challenged the territorial integrity of almost all countries but particularly those that were more ethnically mixed. Furthermore, the war and its aftermath shook demographics across the continent through mass migration and the often-troublesome process of adjustment to new states and modes of governance entailed. A lack of internal cohesion among post-Versailles nations became the key source of internal and international tensions, as illustrated by two studies in this cluster. Most historians of the period have been interested in the links between Berlin and the Sudeten Germans; as it was over their fate that the policy of appeasement first took place, eventually leading to conflict among the powers. In our volume however, David X. Noack explores Weimar Germany's connections with other Germans and national movements/parties in Czechoslovakia, more precisely in Slovakia and Ruthenia. By studying the views of diplomats stationed in Bratislava and Kosice, Noack shows how German foreign policy intensively, but unsuccessfully looked for suitable political partners be it in small German communities, or with Slovak autonomists or Ruthenian activists. No group was eager to adopt the German program of Czechoslovakia's dissolution from within. Contrary to perceived wisdom of minorities as factors of destabilization, ethnic Germans in Slovakia were unsuitable because they kept their pre-war loyalty to Hungary or were sympathetic towards Prague. Similarly, leading Slovak and Ruthenian political parties were hesitant about secession and would not exclude cooperation with the central government. While

German interference in local politics remained superficial, the contacts established by Weimar diplomats nevertheless proved their usefulness years later, when the Nazis fostered the creation of an "independent" Slovakia in 1939.

In the next paper, Anne-Sophie Nardelli-Malgrand, examines a rather fluid Italian policy towards the independence of Austria 1918–33, focusing on the much-debated issue of the Anschluss, which the Entente endeavored to prevent. According to her analysis, until 1922 the Liberal government in Rome believed that Austrian independence perfectly corresponded to its strategic interests. Mussolini however, hesitated for a long time about the positive and negative impacts of the German absorption of Austria, trying to use Austria as his main diplomatic bargaining chip in obtaining benefits for Italy either from Berlin, Paris or the Danubian capitals. It was only after the Great Depression, which damaged the strength of Mussolini's regime, that Italy effectively downgraded the issue of Anschluss: paving the way for the future annexation of Austria by Germany. The Italian shift, as documented by Nardelli-Malgrand, helps to understand the other Big Powers' later lack of interest towards the Anschluss.

Our final cluster is devoted to the issues of soft-power and asymmetrical perception. From 1914–45, all Big Powers, be they democratic, authoritarian or totalitarian relied on cultural diplomacy in their foreign policy. Aiming to boost their prestige and importance abroad, they established cultural institutions like the *British Council*, France's *Alliance Française*, the Italian *Dante Alighieri Society*, the Soviet *VOKS* or even Japan's *Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai*. The impact of networking and propaganda was an important lesson of the Great War, when the Entente powers efficiently undermined the cohesion of Austria-Hungary.[35] In the following years, the Big Powers continued so-called cultural diplomacy, endeavoring to spread their ideologies and values, cultures, language and intensify connections with local elites. Newspapers like *Times*, *Le Temps* or *Völkischer Beobachter*, deeply affected local politics throughout Middle Europe. A personal campaign in favor of the territorial revision of Hungary's frontiers by the British media tycoon Lord Rothermere in the late 1920s caused a wave of friction along the Danube. The first paper in this final pairing may be placed into the context of attempts to influence Middle Europe by methods of propaganda and networking, while the second highlights the importance of perceptions, stereotypes and images on the Middle European situation.

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[35] Philip M. Taylor, *Munitions of the mind. A history of propaganda from the ancient world to the present day* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), 190.

In his contribution, Stefano Santoro uncovers lesser known Italian propaganda towards Middle Europe in 1918–45, looking at the establishment and activities of the numerous Italian Cultural Institutes and associations scattered throughout the region. The Italians were progressively remodeling their cultural activities abroad over the years, from the original basis laid down by the Liberal governments in 1914–22, to the Fascist regime which enhanced this soft power tool with decisive political objectives. Santoro shows how this gradual reconfiguration from Giuseppe Mazzini's universalistic, democratic message and all-embracing Latinity to the idea of the "primacy of Rome" provided historical and moral justification for the ideological penetration of Fascism.

The second piece in this volume's final cluster is an exception in several respects. Expanding our geo-historic concern to its outmost limit, one of the world's leading experts on Japan and WWII veteran Ian Nish analyses opinions about Germany among Japanese political and military elites between 1917 and 1941. Nish reveals how their perceptions, influenced and shaped by culture, played an important role in Japanese decision-making and positioning within the global balance of power. With many of the Japanese elites educated in Germany and widespread respect for German science and industry, Japanese Teutonophilia managed to overcome the fact the two nations had been on opposite sides during the Great War. As Nish explains, the rapprochement between the two countries was caused by a "paranoid" Japanese fear of the Soviet Union, which led to the signing of the Anti-Comintern Pact in 1936 with Germany and the future German-Japanese alliance during WWII. A testimony to the global perception of Germany's key role in Middle Europe and as the only counter-weight to the rise of the Soviets, the German-Japanese alliance nevertheless suffered from much mistrust and malfunction. Germany provided arms for the Nankin government in the Sino-Japanese war while Japanese policy-makers never endorsed anti-Jewish measures in Germany and the Nazi annexation of Austrian, Czech and Polish territories. More significantly, Tokyo was greatly embarrassed by the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact of 1939, signed during Japanese conflict with the Red Army in Mongolia and, two years later, by the German invasion of the USSR, launched soon after the conclusion of the Japanese-Soviet Non-Aggression Treaty in April 1941. This mistrust was only reduced when Berlin (and Rome) approved of the Japanese attack on the USA in December 1941. But, as Nish argues, it was too difficult to harmonize the German war in Europe and Japanese interests in the Pacific. Thus, even

though Tokyo and Berlin pledged to fight the common enemy, Nish argues that during WWII "Germany and Japan fought separate wars."