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Review Of "The Habsburg Monarchy: From Enlightenment To Eclipse" By R. Okey

Pieter M. Judson , '78
Swarthmore College, pjudson1@swarthmore.edu

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Review

Author(s): Pieter M. Judson

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The Habsburg Monarchy: From Enlightenment to Eclipse. By Robin Okey. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001. xii, 456 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Maps. \$35.00, hard bound. \$22.95, paper.

With this volume, Robin Okey hopes to update the field by publishing its first detailed survey since C. A. Macartney's magisterial *The Habsburg Empire* appeared in 1968. Indeed, there is much to update. While the volume of work on the monarchy remains small in comparison with other European fields, recent efforts by scholars from the United States, Britain, Germany, and the successor states have yielded much new and important work. A synthetic project like this one can serve the field in significant ways, especially since Okey has added a welcome new analytic category to those that structured older accounts: the monarchy's dynastic character and its multi-national complexity. Okey's contribution is a field of analysis he refers to as the social modernization of the monarchy.

Okey's diligent attempts to conceptualize the older two categories in terms of this newer one constitute a real strength of this book and produce its most successful sections. Social and economic developments often shaped both the dynamics of nationalist politics and the character of the dynastic state. As Okey notes, "the tendency to view the Monarchy as an exotic anomaly underplays the extent to which it experienced the same [modernizing] processes as most other European lands in the same period" (vi). In his best analysis, nationalist political conflict appears far less a primordial or even predictable phenomenon and more one whose character was determined by the contingencies of nineteenth-century economic, social, and political transformation. Okey's attention to state building and social movements in the mid-nineteenth century is refreshing, given how many authors emphasize the *fin de siècle* as the moment of social upheaval on all fronts.

Yet even as he strives to develop a fresh approach, Okey remains very much wedded to the fundamental presumptions that underlie older analyses of the monarchy, and the volume falls well short of the expectations raised by its author. Several sections of this book inadvertently privilege nationalist tropes about the monarchy that came into fashion immediately following its demise. A quarter century after Istvan Deak's insightful critique of terms like "dominant" and "non-dominant peoples" or "nations" in the monarchy (Deak, "Comments," *Austrian History Yearbook* 3 [1967]), it is surprising that Okey resorts to these nationalist categories to interpret events. He claims to navigate a moderate course between constructivist ideas about nationalist movements and those that locate national origins in prenatal, prepolitical "ethnic groups," yet Okey clearly sympathizes with the latter approach. Occasionally he even adopts an ahistorical approach to nationalist conflict, claiming that "modern readers attuned to see the very stuff of crisis in ethno-cultural differentials will readily deduce—correctly with hindsight—the fragility of any authority operating in this treacherous terrain" (24). The very idea of ethnocultural differentials whose significance transcends history lies at the basis of a nationalist reading of history. Okey also uses the term "ethnicity" to characterize a broad variety of groups separated by different degrees of cultural or linguistic difference, without offering a helpful definition of the term. In consequence, varying types of difference become understood as equally unbridgeable. On the other hand, when discussing specific developments Okey is ready to admit that, "our view of nationalism in the Habsburg Monarchy might be overshadowed by hindsight" (296). Could nationalist political battles, he wonders, have meant anything to ordinary people in terms of their daily lives? He even points out perceptively how the nationalization of politics (rather than of people) created discursive and political frameworks in which nationalist demands were bound to become radicalized, even though, again, most people felt little in the way of nationalist sentiment (296–97). In sum, Okey's approach to nationalism is often frustrating and confused.

Okey is also inconsistent regarding several lesser elements in the book that no historian of the Habsburg monarchy leaves to chance. This reader found no apparent order in Okey's choice of place names—German or Slav—for towns for which no English names

exist. Okey's naming system (foreword, ix) amounts to a license to do as he pleases. Why refer to Pressburg/Poszony as "Slovak Bratislava" in the eighteenth century (10)? Why presume that today's English-speaking readers are more familiar with the name "Reichenberg" than with "Liberec"? Other problems mirror Okey's confused treatment of nations and nationalism. Bohemia-Moravia-Silesia is referred to repeatedly as the "Czech Lands" (4, 231), despite the fact that "Bohemian Lands" is more accurate (and nationally neutral). Okey even refers to the Bohemian Diet of 1861 as the "Czech Diet" (181)! These issues are not oversights on the part of an author whose project is admittedly complex in scope. They reflect a fundamental uncertainty about how to approach difficult questions of interpretation. In conclusion, the book is often useful as survey and synthesis, but it will not replace Macartney.

PIETER M. JUDSON
Swarthmore College

The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999. By Timothy Snyder. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003. xvi, 367 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. Photographs. Figures. Tables. Maps. \$35.00, hard bound.

This is a courageous book, not so much because of its specific arguments (though plenty of these will generate productive controversy), but because of its form and style. It is hard to assess *The Reconstruction of Nations* within the genres of current American scholarship, and that may be its greatest strength. Historians who expect a focus on original archival research will find only a limited amount of that here: the bulk of Snyder's argumentation is drawn from secondary sources and published primary collections. Social scientists will find some engagement with the theoretical literature on nation formation, but one of Snyder's main arguments is that historical contingency and individual agency are too important to allow for the easy application of grand theories. Specialists in the fields of Polish, Lithuanian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian history will find much that is new here, but Snyder's originality is artfully cast so that it sneaks up on the reader cloaked in the familiar. Perhaps the most appreciative audience for this book will be the one we academics infrequently try to reach: the general public. This is one of those rare books that challenges conventional wisdom in a way that is accessible to those mostly likely to be conventionally wise.

"When do nations arise, what brings ethnic cleansing, how can states reconcile?" Thus, on the first page, does Snyder formulate the issues that he grapples with in this volume. The site for exploring these questions is the area of the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, out of which arose four (or three, since Snyder paints an ambiguous picture of Belarus) modern nations. Scholars from a number of disciplines have tackled grand questions like these in the past, but Snyder brings to the problem a historian's sensitivity to detail and subtlety, something all too often missing from similarly comprehensive accounts. He ends up with two noteworthy conclusions: first, that the particularities of each case—the random events, the personalities of specific political leaders, the flow of fortune and misfortune—are as important (and sometimes more important) than underlying social or demographic forces; second, that national identity in the modern world mainly relies on "history" (understood as an elite cultural construction that entails the highly selective appropriation of events from the past) rather than "tradition" (understood as the memories cultivated by families, small communities, and individuals). To make these broad points, Snyder simply tells the story of northeastern Europe over four hundred years. Obviously such a project will have to rely extensively on the scholarship of others, but Snyder knows enough about the work of his fellow historians not to simply regurgitate the narratives he finds in the existing surveys and monographs. Instead, he reads against the grain and whenever possible draws upon published collections of documents. Snyder slows his account at a few key points along the way, offering an extended discussion of the Lithuanization of Vilnius in the twentieth century, the mutual ethnic cleansing carried out by Poles and Ukrainians between 1943 and 1947, and the foreign policy of Poland following the fall of communism after 1989. It is at these points that specialists are most likely to