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Imaginary Enemies

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The title of Martin Moll’s exemplary study refers to the 1914 proclamation by the combatant regimes that home fronts were to be socially and politically unified for the duration of the First World War. This work makes an important contribution to a growing body of work that documents how European governments incited nationalist opposition through the very policies ostensibly designed to avoid them. This effect was particularly evident in Austria-Hungary, where imperial authorities implemented harsh policies in the hope of preventing any national opposition that might subvert the war effort.

In the Austrian half of the Dual Monarchy, the wartime military dictatorship wrongly believed that some of the monarchy’s language groups would oppose the war effort. They presumed—almost always mistakenly—an irredentist Serb- or Italian-speaking populace (for example) desired victory for Austria-Hungary’s enemies. The Austrian military authorities considered the loyalty of other language groups suspect as well, among them the country’s Czech-speakers, who were located primarily in the northwest, and its Slovene-speakers in the southwest.

Historians today agree that the vast majority of Austrian citizens and recruits remained loyal to Austria during the first years of the war, even though popular mythologies in the successor states promoted the opposite view. That Austrian authorities could have doubted the loyalties of so many of the state’s subjects had more to do with the success of local German nationalist propagandists in shaping elite public opinion about other language groups than it did with those groups’ actual behaviors. This point is on display in the fate of Austria’s Slovenes. That anyone questioned the loyalty of Austria’s largely rural, patriotic, and devoutly Catholic Slovene-speaking population seems almost incredible. Slovene-speaking units demonstrated distinction in combat, particularly on the Italian front, which opened up in 1915. Government censors, too, reported patriotic attitudes among Slovene-speakers in Styria down to 1918. Nevertheless, Moll documents an important and untold story of wartime prosecutions directed largely against Slovene-speakers and set in the southern districts of the Austrian province of Styria, whose inhabitants spoke Slovene, German, or both languages.

Despite the time span indicated in the book’s title, Moll focuses most of his study on a brief period of legal persecutions of ordinary Styrians during the summer of 1914, beginning with the assassinations at Sarajevo and lasting through the early autumn. During this period and under the cover of military justice, local gendarmes arrested and imprisoned hundreds of Styrian men, women, and minors who had allegedly displayed so-called Serbophile tendencies. These people were judged by the authorities—and often by neighbors who had informed on them for any number of reasons—to constitute a serious domestic threat to the Austro-Hungarian war effort. Moll examines this witch-hunt in considerable detail and
easily determines that something other than a threat to Austro-Hungarian security produced these events.

Yet Moll’s object is not simply to right an injustice, but to investigate the dynamics that drove the resulting waves of wanton persecution. In the central section of the book, he changes tack between several levels of analysis, seeking to piece together the various elements that produced and legitimated the persecutions. He investigates the actions of local police officials, of regional military officials, of Styrian governor Count Manfred Clary-Aldringen, and of civilian imperial ministers in Vienna in over twenty specific legal cases. He embeds his analysis of each case in a superbly constructed history of local and neighborhood politics in southern Styria. Moll’s detailed depiction of local nationalist movements (including their leaders, organizations, and media) down to the level of the village or the neighborhood demonstrates the remarkable degree to which nationalist conflict had come to shape communal power relations in the years prior to the war.

The most interesting and important aspects of his analysis center on two different topics. First, Moll analyzes in convincing detail the administrative mechanisms, local conditions, and even the personal relationships that may have produced the local persecutions. His unfailing knowledge of bureaucratic structures, of competing wartime lines of authority, and of prewar village life produces a vividly detailed analysis of several cases, each of which embodies for Moll a particular form or quality of the persecution. Secondly, Moll pursues the distinctive legacies of this wave of hysteria. For example, as anti-Slovene paranoia diminished toward the end of 1914, it was replaced by rising concerns about the Italian-speaking population in the spring of 1915, as Italy prepared to join the war on the side of the Entente powers. The bureaucrats and gendarmes, however, appear to have learned from their mistakes of the previous autumn, and they handled cases of suspected subversion in 1915 far more cautiously.

Other legacies persisted as well. In the final section of the book Moll investigates the effects of the persecutions on Slovene public opinion during the war, and on later efforts by Slovene nationalist politicians to obtain redress and compensation for those who had been unfairly accused in 1914. In 1917, as a sign of his willingness to consider some degree of political reform in the Austrian half of the Dual Monarchy, the new emperor, Charles I, brought the Austrian parliament back into session. Slovene nationalist deputies criticized the government relentlessly about the persecutions of 1914, publicly citing details of official misconduct from several individual cases. In consequence, the imperial government empowered two high-profile investigatory committees to sift through the evidence. The emperor meanwhile proclaimed an amnesty for remaining political prisoners, and the government repealed the law of July 25, 1914 that had subjected Austrian citizens to military justice. Unfortunately for the Austrians, the amnesty, the repeal, and the investigations of misconduct often produced more nationalist conflict, both in the parliament and in local towns. By exonerating the victims and criticizing the overly hasty actions of the gendarmerie and of Austria’s military rulers, for example, the government appeared to imply that German nationalist accusations about Slovene nationalists had been baseless. This implication angered German nationalists, in turn, who now believed that their own patriotism had been called into question.

Moll’s analysis ends with an assertion that the location of the 1919 border between Yugoslavia/Slovenia and Austria, which split Styria in two, constituted less an imposed outcome from the outside than one uniquely “made in Styria.” In his terms, the “drifting apart of the two nations” even before the war (“who had lived together in peace in Styria for so long”) made the political split of 1919 inevitable (p. 540). Moll is careful not to blame nationalist conflict itself for the outcome. Rather, he asserts that the advent of war inadvertently gave German nationalists access to a range of state instruments that they used against their political enemies, and it was this confluence of events that caused the final break.

This book also suggests some equally important conclusions, however, that point in other directions as well. First, given our knowledge of military regimes during the First World War, it is striking to read about the concern for legality, for adherence to regular procedures, and for the importance of the rule of law in many of the documents. Without diminishing the cruel excesses of the military regime (which were endorsed early on by many opportunistic civilian politicians), it is nevertheless striking that the dynasty and the Austrian state investigated these cases in an attempt to restore confidence in civilian rule. Second, Moll’s detailed accounts of local cases suggest that while nationalist feeling could certainly produce local mob mentalities, it did not always carry weight with locals, when it appeared to conflict with what they believed to be their better knowledge of their neighbors’ character. When some people fell under suspicion of subversion, occasionally neighbors who claimed to belong to the other nation discounted the veracity of the
accusations, based on their own local knowledge. This information reminds us of the occasional split between the nationalized world of politics and the less clearly nationalized aspects of social life. One comes away from this impressive study with a sense of disjunction between the nationalist certainties spouted by newspapers, politicians, and mobs, and the national uncertainties expressed by many other local witnesses.

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