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NATIONALIST ACTIVISM AND THE PROBLEM OF BORDERLANDS IN THE HABSBURG MONARCHY, 1880-1918

When we speak about the geography of frontiers in the period that directly preceded the First World War, we need to understand the degree to which the term “frontier” carried a range of powerful ideological meanings, particularly in the context of the Habsburg Monarchy. The science of geography may have made significant technological developments in terms of mapping the physical terrain of Habsburg Central Europe, but other forces also influenced the ways in which a literate public in the region understood the term “frontier”. The concept of the frontier – and with it much of the efforts of geographers between 1880 and 1918 – was strongly influenced by a range of new politically nationalist concepts. These nationalist concepts interpreted natural, demographic, and anthropological forms of data in terms of the political and cultural claims made by nationalists.

During the nineteenth century, nationalists throughout Europe often equated particular natural phenomena – rivers, mountain ranges, valleys, climates – with their own nations. In many cases these nationalists and scientists sought to justify the territorial spread and claims of nation states by means of the natural geographic phenomena they studied. France under Napoleon, for example, should expand to the natural border of the Rhine river, just as later wartime Italian nationalists argued for the extension of Italy’s border to the Brenner Pass. In Habsburg Central Europe, however, this territorial tendency took on very different characteristics because unlike most other states, the Austrian half of the dual Monarchy did not legitimate its existence as a nation state. Rather, this Austrian state presented itself as a multi-cultural or multi-national sphere of cultural coexistence.

Ideologists for the Habsburg Empire justified its existence as a home of many diverse nations, cultures, and natural environments. This presentation of the Monarchy was best exemplified in the 24-volume series, *Österreich-Ungarn in Wort und Bild* [*Austria-Hungary in Word and Picture*], also known as the *Kronprinzenwerk*, after its first patron Crown Prince Rudolf (SZASZ, 1997; STAGL, 2002; BENDIX, 2003; PETSCHAR, 2011). Published between 1885 and 1902 in 24 German-language volumes and 21 Hungarian language volumes [*Az Osztrák-Magyar*

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Monarchia írásban és képen], the series detailed the geological, geographic, botanical, demographic, architectural, anthropological qualities of each crownland and its many peoples. The *Kronprinzenwerk* and similar official and non-official efforts presented the empire as a protector of natural and cultural diversity. In doing so, however, these efforts also inadvertently reinforced ideas about the national and cultural differences that allegedly separated different peoples, even though the Austrian state did not recognize such differences in law.

Within this society of many cultures, nationalists did not have the support of the state when they sought to link their national communities to a particular territory, that is, to territorialize their particular nations. In France, Germany, or Italy the state itself defined the extent of the nation's territory. In the Habsburg Monarchy, however, it was non-governmental nationalist activists who asserted and justified territorial claims for their national communities. It was their task to map their own existence in the first place. As a result, what set the tasks of these nationalists apart from those of nationalists in most of the rest of Europe, was their need to define borders "between nations within" the state, rather than to define national borders as state borders. Czech, German, Italian, or Slovene nationalists among others, for example, had no defined territories that were legally recognized as "theirs". So it was their challenge to use all means at their disposal to map their own territories and to assert their claims persuasively, often against the competing claims of other nationalists in the same region. To do this, nationalist activists used the technical means with which sciences like geography, demography, anthropology, and history provided them.

For all these reasons, the concept of the "frontier" came to occupy a distinctive and politically charged set of meanings within Habsburg Austria, especially in the period 1880-1918. The term did not refer to the official political frontiers that separated historic provinces within the state, such as Bohemia, Tyrol, Istria, or Hungary. Instead, nationalist political activists in the Habsburg Monarchy proposed a different understanding of frontier to justify their claims to territory. They developed a concept of frontier defined by the boundaries that allegedly separated ethnic or cultural nations. The region where these cultural nations bordered each other became understood as regions of competition and conflict.

This idea of the frontier as a boundary between ethnic groups, rather than between political entities, certainly influenced scientific ideas about geography and its purposes by placing them both in a context defined by the demands of nationalism and nationhood. The scientific task of geography now became to map the territorial extent of the nation. In the Habsburg Empire, which of course included the territory around Trento, nationalists usually referred to this concept of frontier between ethnic nations more specifically as «language frontiers», in German, *Sprachgrenze*, in Czech *jazykové hranice*, and in Italian «*Frontiere linguistiche*» (JUDSON, 2006, pp. 1-18, pp. 26-27).

The importance of language use to defining national identity and national territory here was critically important. Nationalists called these regions “language frontiers” because in the Habsburg Monarchy in the second half of the nineteenth century, nationalists increasingly defined their concepts of nation specifically according to language use. This habit was not accidental. The Imperial Austrian state was not organized around the idea of an ethnic nation. It was a dynastic and composite state that constitutionally and legally recognized the rights of many language groups to schooling and to communication with the local government in their own languages. In Imperial Austria after 1867 there were two high courts whose judges often dealt with questions about language rights and their implementation (STOURZH, 1985).

At the same time, however, the Habsburg state did not recognize ethnic nations as such in law or in its institutions. It sought to avoid creating alternative loyalties such as nationalist ones that might compete with people’s identification with the Habsburg dynasty and state. So the state spoke of the rights of language groups or of individuals who spoke particular languages, but it did not define nations in the constitution (beyond speakers of languages) and it did not assign specific rights to nations as such². And because no language group made up more than half of the population in Imperial Austria, there was clearly no national majority and there were no national minorities. There were only regional majorities and minorities that changed depending on the region. So it was left to the nationalist activists – Czech, German, Italian, Polish, Slovene, Ukrainian – to do the kind of ethnic nation-building work that in other European Empires (such as in Great Britain, France, Italy, Germany or Hungary) would have also been done by the government.

Because of the constitutional language guarantees and the courts that upheld them, political nationalists almost always made legal and political claims on the state specifically in terms of language issues and “language use fairness”. Political nationalists in a different state or a different part of the world might well have defined their nations according to different character traits such as religion. But in the case of Austria-Hungary almost every issue raised by nationalists in the period 1867-1918 had to do with language use in public institutions.

In order to make legal claims about language use fairness, nationalists needed to determine where their nations were located, and especially where the boundaries were that separated them from or joined them to neighboring nations. But while the idea of a linguistic frontier between nations may have made sense in the abstract, as the meeting point of defined groups of peoples

² Article 19 of the Austrian Fundamental Laws (1867) stated that «All National groups within the state are equal, and each one has the inviolable right to cultivate its nationality and language. The equality of each recognized provincial language in schools, state offices, and public life is recognized by the state [...]» (STOURZH, 1985, pp. 200-201).

who identified with and spoke different languages, the real linguistic and social situation in these regions was not as clearly defined as the nationalists portrayed it. Although in the imagination or on paper one might easily draw clear lines between distinct language groups, in real life and in real places this idea rarely reflected reality for at least two reasons. In the first place, people's linguistic practices were often more complex than the concept of two separate nations with two separate languages imagined. Many people in multilingual regions, literate or not, spoke different languages in different contexts. This made sense in terms of the demands of local economic, social, and cultural relations. In the second place, people's local language use did not necessarily determine or influence their public self-identification in predictable ways. Nationalists may have divided peoples according to their beliefs about language use and separate national cultures, but real people did not always see themselves reflected in these national ideas (JUDSON, 2016; ZAHRA, 2010; COHEN, 1981)³.

For these reasons, the nationalist idea of the language frontier produced a fundamental paradox when applied to real places. Nationalists treated the language frontier as a place where people who spoke different languages lived in close proximity to each other. It therefore became in their imaginations a place of terrible struggle for national survival in every day life. These struggles had supposedly characterized the frontier regions for more than a thousand years. Nationalist writings argued that wherever two nations met, one would try to conquer the other. As Rudolf Hans Bartsch told the readers of his frontier novel *Das deutsche Leid* [*German Suffering*]:

«Then the German arrived with the bible and the *Nibelungenlied* in his hands... Like the Archangel Michael who descended from the clouds to destroy the dragon, the German conquered this land from on high» (BARTSCH, 1912).

The paradox was that the people who actually lived in these regions in the late nineteenth century rarely understood or acted as if they had conquered the land from anyone, or lived in a situation of ongoing national struggle. Nationalists constantly complained that the people who lived in these spaces where language groups met did not see themselves as people of a frontier, nor did they take seriously their role in an ongoing struggle for the survival of the nation (JUDSON, 2006). One German nationalist observed «the indifference of men who call themselves German and who administer their precious charge so foolishly that they must relinquish it to the enemy» (JUDSON, 2006, p. 39). Another in southern Styria complained that «the German sides with the Slovene enemy against his own people» (IBIDEM).

³ See also the earlier analysis of so-called “side switching” among Czech and German speaking members of the working classes in Prague by Gary Cohen (COHEN, 1981).

In the period 1880-1918, nationalists increasingly focused their resources on nationalizing these frontier people more effectively. It turned out to be a very difficult challenge. For many people, language use alone did not define their local understanding of their identification. Not surprisingly, many people in mixed language areas also treated the nationalists with mistrust, often seeing them as meddling outsiders. Local people often felt that they shared more characteristics in common with their trusted neighbors – even if those neighbors spoke another language – than they shared with nationalists who often came from elsewhere. Nationalist outsiders reacted to this behavior with predictable annoyance: one observer in southern Styria complained that in that region «the German sides with the Slovene enemy against his own people». This nationalist blamed this behavior on the local Slovene-speaking priest who had allegedly «unmanned the farmers nationally and driven them to the point of denying their own natural [nationalist] instincts» (IVI, pp. 39-40). Indeed, while nationalists who arrived in such multilingual rural regions, usually as teachers, may have spoken a version of the same language as many of the local people, in other ways, they often seemed to be culturally quite alien to the local people. And nationalists who were not outsiders to the village often expressed frustration that their neighbors were unwilling to commit themselves fully to nationalist loyalties. One German nationalist observer wrote of the farmers he observed in Southern Bohemia: «The peasant population acquiesces easily to Czech encroachments» (ZEMMRICH, 1902).

At this point in the discussion it is important to remember the many possible distinctions between someone's language-use and their possible national identity. As I said above, simple language use did not necessarily give a person consciousness of sharing a particular national political identity. Here I follow the work of sociologist Rogers Brubaker. He warns us not to make abstract groups like nations into the actors or subjects of history, «as if groups were internally homogeneous, externally bounded, even unitary collective actors with common purposes» (BRUBAKER, 2004, p. 8). Groups always change. They form and reform. They do not have an internal, organic purpose, nor can they act with unity. A view that treats nations themselves as actors or subjects in history imagines that they are somehow permanent, constant, and unified, without change, and therefore outside of history. In my analysis, a nation is not a real community and it can never be an actor in history. My historical work does not treat nations as historical subjects or as actors. Instead, nations are mental constructs.

Brubaker, too, argues that a “nation” is not a group; it is instead a way to perceive the world, a cognitive lens through which some people understand the world. «Ethnicity, race, and nationhood are fundamentally ways of perceiving, interpreting and representing the social world» he argues (IVI, p. 17). «They are not things in the world but perspectives on the world» (IBIDEM). But as a lens, nationhood cannot be an actor *in the world*. If nation is a lens, then people can

adopt or *abandon* the lens of nationhood, depending on the situation. Historians interested in nationalism should stop asking «what is a nation», and instead investigate the question: in what *situations* do people adopt a nationalist lens? In what historical situations did the idea of nation matter to people? And equally importantly, they should ask in what situations nation did not matter to people? As we will see, these questions are especially important for thinking about the peoples who lived in the so-called linguistic frontier regions.

Many historians have difficulty understanding the idea that when people in mixed-language regions used different languages, this fact did not necessarily divide their communities between two clearly defined national groups. When they examine such regions, they often commence their investigation already knowing the final conclusion. They presume the existence of, for example, a Czech nation, a German nation, an Italian nation. In fact I think that we should ask the question, whether for most people it was important to join any national community at all? So, for example, there really is no Czech history or German history in the Bohemian towns I have examined. Rather there is a nationalist history and a non-nationalist history. I would say the same for other mixed-language regions as well.

When confronted with the idea that loyalty to the nation should structure their social lives, people of these so-called frontier regions might refuse to commit themselves to any nation at all. Often they felt little loyalty to any group or to an idea of nation that stretched beyond their own home region. Language use may have influenced people's understanding of local groups to some extent, but language use was as often about questions of communication, not so much about questions of fundamental identification. More often than not, people in these regions needed to be able to speak something of another language in order to engage in local trade, transport, and interregional commerce. This economic concern motivated many working-class and peasant families to educate their children in both languages of the region, despite nationalists warnings that a child educated in the wrong language could become lost to the nation. Bilingualism offered them a critical road to social mobility, something nationalists could not see.

It is also important to see that even when nationalists succeeded in convincing people of the importance of nation, after years of sustained activism, many people in these settings ignored it except when nationalist conflict appeared to influence some important aspect of their local and daily lives, as at election time or when the government took the census. One perennial difficulty was also that nationalists demanded an impossibly high standard of loyalty to the nation from their communities. After a while, it was not simply a question of voting the proper way in municipal elections or answering the language questions correctly when the census was taken every ten years, or even of joining the correct singing or gymnastics or reading association. Increasingly after 1900 nationalists demanded that people shop at certain stores, employ only members of the nation in their

businesses or as domestic servants, send their children to particular schools, or even vacation in hotels owned by co-nationals.

After 1880, nationalist organizations that sought to strengthen the demographic and social presence of the nation in mixed-language regions became more noticeable in daily life. The enormously popular Czech and German school associations [*Deutscher Schulverein*, *Matice Školska*] founded in 1880, for example, sought actively to prevent the loss to the nation of “their” children who lived as minorities in mixed-language regions and who had no opportunity to attend a school in their own language⁴. These school associations built private minority language schools in mixed-language communities where there were not enough children of the minority language to qualify for a state-supported school⁵. In fact, it was a German-speaking priest from the South Tyrol whose writings about children allegedly lost to the German nation in the South Tyrol who inspired the founding of the German School Association (JUDSON, 2006, p. 26). The school associations also built school buildings, and these became visible symbols of the national community in many rural landscapes. In my book *Guardians of the Nation* I call these schools «frontier fortresses». In multilingual regions, school association schools competed with state schools for the attendance of the same children, offering clothing, shoes, free books, and gifts at Christmas, or feeding meals to poorer children in order to win over more parents and children for the nation. Soon these «fortress schools» became the targets for nationalist anger as well. This anger produced broken windows, graffiti, and tales of threatened children in local newspapers (JUDSON, 2006, pp. 19-65).

How did nationalist activists learn where their efforts were most needed? How did they locate mixed-language regions where the nation most needed their support? How did they map the outer boundaries of their nations? How did they give their national communities a territorial existence? In Imperial Austria the territorial boundaries of the imagined nation were not self evident and rarely coincided with the traditional political boundaries of the many crownlands. It is true, for example, that Czech nationalists claimed for their nation all of the historic territories of the Crown of St. Wenceslas, that is, the crownlands of Bohemia, Moravia, and Austrian Silesia. Hungarian ethnic nationalists too claimed for themselves the entire political territory of the Kingdoms of Hungary, Croatia, and the principality of Transylvania. Polish nationalists claimed the crownland of Galicia for their nation. German nationalists claimed the territory of Tyrol, and Italian nationalists claimed Trieste and the Littoral. But within each of these

⁴ These School Associations also included the Slovene nationalist *Družba Ciril-Metod* and the Italian nationalist *Lega Nazionale* (JUDSON, 2006, pp. 16-17, pp. 25-27).

⁵ In 1884 Austria's Administrative High court determined that parents could demand a state-funded school in a minority language when a five-year average of forty school-age children lived within a two hour walking distance of a community (BURGER, 1995, pp. 100-110).

defined territories, rival nationalists also made serious claims. German nationalists also claimed large parts of Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia. Croatian, Romanian, Serb and Slovak nationalists claimed territories within the old Kingdom of Hungary. Ukrainian nationalists made territorial demands on eastern Galician territory and on Galicia's capital city of Lemberg/Lwow/L'viv. Italian nationalists claimed substantial parts of the Tyrol, and Slovene, Croatian and German nationalists all saw Trieste and the Littoral as somehow theirs.

In the late nineteenth century nationalist activists increasingly used the technological developments associated with the Austrian census, along with new technologies of mapping, to create, publicize, and persuade people about this idea of the language frontier (GOEDERLE, 2016). Because imperial Austria did not recognize nations in law⁶, nationalists had to define their territories for themselves, and nationalists claimed that wherever people spoke a certain language, that was the national territory. Starting in 1880 in the Austrian Empire, every ten years the census asked respondents for their so-called "language of daily use", known as *Umgangssprache* in German (BRIX, 1982). The Austrian census takers did not ask respondents for their "mother tongue" or their "national language" because they wanted to use a formulation that would avoid any pretense of nationalization⁷. The Austrian census takers also did not ask about knowledge or use of second or third languages⁸. Nevertheless, nationalists treated the question about language use as a measurement of nationality, and urged people to report their national language when the census was taken. Every ten years when the government took the census it became an occasion for political conflict. Rival nationalists accused each other or the government of forcing or bribing some people to report the "wrong" language to change the numbers. Some nationalist organizations even carried out their own private census! But to understand the linguistic frontier idea, it is more important to see that the census results gave nationalists the tools to map their nations onto particular territories.

The influence of the census on nationalists was enormous. The census offered scientifically-based statistics to nationalists which allowed them to map their nations onto territories. The census also created the appearance of scientific

⁶ The Austrian state recognized the rights of language groups, but individuals remained free to determine which language they used, and even to change their language. Austria did not ascribe national identity to its citizens, nor did it define particular territories as belonging to one language group or another.

⁷ By contrast the Hungarian census did ask about mother tongue in order to measure the use of the Hungarian language and to determine the needs of the government's linguistic "Hungarianization" programs. The later Hungarian censuses also asked about respondents' second languages as a way to measure the success of Hungarianization efforts.

⁸ This choice not to measure the extent of people's knowledge of second or third languages was evidently a product of the demands of international standardization.

coherence on paper where in reality I believe that such coherence did not exist. For example the census could not measure bilingualism. The census also legitimated the claims of some national languages while delegitimizing other languages used by many people in the empire. The census also did not measure the prevalence of some local languages like “Yiddish” or even “Moravian”, treating them as dialects. The census allowed nationalists to create maps that claimed territories based on the reported results. Such maps depicted national territories usually by using blocks of a single color for regions where a majority reported one language as opposed to another. Because the maps rarely showed minority languages in a district but only the majority language, this created a stronger picture of linguistic and national territorial coherence. On the other hand, when they wanted to emphasize the threat of other nations to “their territories”, nationalists might shade the border regions using two colors.

A nation is a big abstract community. How did nationalists try to persuade people that they belonged to this abstract community? How do you persuade German speakers who live in Bolzano that they belong to the same nation with people who live far away in the Eastern city of Czernowitz in Bukovina? Nationalists worked hard to create perceptions of nation in the local villages. They tried to connect local ideas to larger abstract ideas of national communities. Nationalists developed many strategies to mobilize men, women, and children in linguistic frontier regions to create the nation. They raised a lot of money – millions of crowns, built hundreds of minority language schoolhouses, and libraries, social centers, and nationalist monuments, (even hiking paths) in order to make real the claim that a territory belonged to their nation. They raised money to build monuments to nationalist figures, they named streets after nationalist heroes, they built private minority schools for children, they organized welfare programs to give aid to poorer people. Man-made elements of the landscape, particularly those that required technical knowledge, such as suspension bridges, railways, or local swimming pools became examples of the nation’s progressive modernity.

Still another strategy was to harness the consumer revolution for nationalist purposes. Nationalists raised funds for nationalist causes by selling cheap consumer items such as kitchen matches or soap. They also argued that men and women should make nationalist choices in all aspects of life, where they shopped for food, what restaurant they visited, what bank they used, whom they hired as servants and what tourist destinations they selected. These ideas about consumption made an economic argument and a personal one. The economic argument taught people that even in their smallest consumer actions they could support the life of the national community. The personal argument discouraged social interaction among people who allegedly belonged to different nations. All of this was meant to make the nation important to people’s lives.

Local newspapers played an especially critical role in this process.

Newspapers shaped local perceptions of events by linking local identities to trans-regional identities. For example in Bohemia, a brawl at a pub among drunks would be reported as a “nationalist” incident. The Czech language newspaper blamed the local German speakers and the German language newspaper blamed the local Czech speakers. Both newspapers gave this event a nationalist significance, linking it to a larger politics, even if they invented elements of the story. There was usually no anti-nationalist newspaper to contradict such interpretations of local events.

We can also find this mental concept of an ethnic or national frontier, however, in the many nationalist novels, poetry, and essays that proliferated in Austria in the period 1880-1914. Many of these forms of literature described an ideal vision of life on this frontier, while also describing the terrible consequences that could occur when people on the frontier forgot their nationality and “fraternized” with the enemy. Such “fraternization” could mean anything from socializing in church to buying goods in a store owned by an enemy national to something as intimate as entering into a so-called “mixed marriage.” These publications obviously did not reflect the character of life in mixed language regions. Instead, they were assertions of how nationalist activists believed that life ought to be there (BARTSCH, 1912; MAHNERT, 1912; SALBURG, 1915).

These nationalist writings almost always betrayed their authors’ anxieties about the possibility that some people might change their language or even their identification because it would help the enemy nation to grow at the expense of the home nation. We know about the frequent unwillingness of many of these so-called frontier people to commit themselves to a national identification precisely because the nationalists themselves so often articulated their anxieties and frustrations with what they saw as people’s non-nationalist behavior. Nationalist publications regularly criticized the so-called short-sightedness and disloyalty of local people who allegedly did not take their national identity seriously enough.

To make clear the extent of the apparent danger, nationalists also used a warlike rhetoric in their writings and speeches to characterize these situations, characterizing daily life situations in terms of “battles”, “wars”, and “heroism”. The same warlike discourse branded those people who learned two languages or who apparently changed nations as “traitors” or “renegades” (JUDSON, 2006). Thus, at least in theory, nationalists feared that if the nation did not continually conquer new territory and new people for itself, it might, in turn, be defeated by others. In the minds of many activists the language frontier occupied a dual position, both as a hopeful place for the expansion of the nation, and as a place of anxiety, because many local people showed no lasting loyalty to a nation.

In conclusion, I have argued in this essay that in the Habsburg Monarchy of the late nineteenth century, the idea of the “language frontier” stood at the very center of the nationalists’ geographic imagination. Nationalist activists of all kinds in Habsburg Austria and Hungary projected their imperialist dreams,

and also their anxieties about the future, onto these imagined frontier zones. Would their nations grow or weaken? They believed that this question would not be decided in the parliaments, provincial diets, nor even in the cities, but by the inhabitants who lived on the mostly rural linguistic frontiers (ZEMMRICH, 1902). In this sense, geography dominated the thinking of nationalists in the Habsburg Monarchy in critical ways that it did not in other European states.

Nationalists did not succeed in making the linguistic frontiers national until after the First World War and the collapse of the Habsburg Empire, and then with often terrible consequences. At first, the experience of war reminded nationalists that their expectations about the loyalties and commitments of local people on the language frontiers near the front did not always match reality. In Italian-speaking or mixed regions, for example, some irredentists fled to Italy while many people were temporarily removed to refugee camps in the Austrian interior. Nevertheless, many Italian speakers remained loyal to Austria. When one Italian general occupied a border town at the outset of the War, he warned the Italian-speaking population that «my soldiers are convinced that they are conducting a war of liberation, not occupation, and woe betide you, if they learn that you are not content to be liberated from Austria» (COLE, 2014, p. 320). After the battle of Caporetto/Kobarid in the fall of 1917, the Italian military's distrust toward the local Italian speaking Austrian population only increased. This distrust remained strong even after the war, when both the Liberal and later Fascist regimes preferred not to employ local Italians from the Trentino, to whom they often referred as “*Austriacanti*” or “*Austrophiles*” (PERGHER, 2012; COLE, 2015).

Nevertheless, after 1918 nationalists did finally gain the full support of the regimes (such as Italy, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania, or Yugoslavia) to nationalize the language frontiers and force people to belong to a single nation. After 1918 in these successor states that styled themselves as “nation states”, people were essentially forced by state policy to belong to one ethnic nation, either to a majority or to a minority nation. People rarely had the right to choose their nation for themselves because the successor states ascribed national belonging to people according to predetermined sets of character traits or observations about their life styles. Children had to attend the schools that nationalist states dictated. (ZAHRA, 2008a). Ethnic minorities became defined and then “managed” according to the needs of these so-called nation states, most of which housed millions of people who did not even speak the national language⁹. This nation-state logic also

⁹ In the new Poland and the enlarged Romania after the War over a third of the population neither spoke the national language nor practiced what became for all intents and purposes, the national religions (Roman Catholicism in Poland, Orthodoxy in Romania). In Czechoslovakia, no one language group made up more than 50% of the population. Italy gained hundreds of thousands of Croat-, German-, and Slovene speakers (JUDSON, 2016, pp. 446-447). France expelled over 200.000 people it considered to be German from Alsace and Lorraine and categorized the rest according to similar ascribed standards of loyalty (ZAHRA, 2008b).

justified brutal population exchanges where possible, as with the Orthodox and Muslim exchanges between Greece and Turkey mandated in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne (WEITZ, 2008). Later, the same logic justified wholesale expulsions of unwanted populations. Territory and ethnicity had to match, and in the dangerous world of interwar Europe there could be no space for ambivalent or ambiguous populations. After the war, nationalists frequently contrasted their new, forward-looking, and allegedly democratic societies to the old Habsburg Empire, referring to it as a “prison of nations”. But they were wrong. The real prisons of nations, as the people of the language frontiers soon learned, were in fact the self-styled nation states that inherited territories from the Habsburg Empire.

Today, the nationalist outcomes of history continue often to dominate the ways that we write the histories of the regions that once belonged to the Habsburg Empire. The power of the nationalist way of thinking lies precisely in the fact that we do not see the *hard work* that produced this nationalist way of thinking. Too often we think that the idea of nation is natural. We think that a national identity is normal. Because of that, we do not see the many years of hard work (and later state intervention) that were required before people would think of themselves in a nationalist way. Moreover, we tend only to see nationalist successes. We easily forget that one hundred years ago, nationalists often failed to build the popular nationalist communities they hoped to create, especially outside the cities. These nationalist failures remain invisible in most histories of Europe today. At the time, however, these failures produced much discourse, much writing by nationalists, a writing of frustration, of disappointment and of anger. Looking at these failures – especially on the language frontiers – could help us to understand European history in a less-national and more trans-national way.

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NATIONALIST ACTIVISM AND THE PROBLEM OF BORDERLANDS IN THE HABSBURG MONARCHY, 1880-1918 – In the years around 1900, transformations in the politics and in ethnography in the Habsburg Empire created new ideas about the significance of border regions, in particular those border regions that united people who spoke different languages or who were bilingual in their daily life. These frontiers became intensely politicized as fundamentally important for the survival of ethnic nations, and as the most important sites in which the nation fought for its survival. The politicization of the imperial census and the ethnographic writings both contributed to the territorialization of nations. This in turn made the border a critical site of nationalist activism. Whether or not the people living in these regions actually considered themselves to live on a frontier remains a matter of considerable debate.

L'ATTIVISMO NAZIONALISTA E IL PROBLEMA DELLE FRONTIERE LINGUISTICHE NELL'IMPERO ASBURGICO, 1880-1918 – Negli anni intorno al 1900, le trasformazioni nella politica e nell'etnografia nell'Impero Asburgico produssero nuove idee sul significato delle regioni di confine, e particolarmente in quelle dove vivevano persone che parlavano lingue diverse o che erano bilingue nella loro vita quotidiana. Queste frontiere divennero intensamente politicizzate, in quanto fondamentali per la sopravvivenza delle nazioni etniche e campi di battaglia per la sopravvivenza della nazione. La politicizzazione del censimento imperiale e degli scritti etnografici contribuirono al processo di territorializzazione delle nazioni. Questo a sua volta ha fatto delle aree di confine un sito critico per l'attivismo nazionalista. Sia che coloro che attualmente abitano in queste regioni percepiscano o no di vivere su una frontiera, tale questione rimane al centro di un considerevole dibattito.